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Ethical Perspectives on Reality Television: Parenting Docu-Soaps, Makeover Shows, and Parodies of Reality Dating Programs

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Abstract

This thesis argues that certain characteristics of reality television subgenres are likely to consistently produce ethical problems in programs belonging to those subgenres. Through the ethical analysis of cases studies from three subgenres of reality television, I also demonstrate the relative value of various normative ethical frameworks in analysing ethical problems in reality programming. I also argue that popular, non-academic criticisms of reality television act as implicit ethical judgements that align with formal criticisms from normative ethics.

My first chapter addresses the ethical problems of informed consent, agency and representation in *Extreme Guide to Parenting* (Bravo 2014) and *Toddlers & Tiaras* (TLC 2008–13), two docu-soap programs that feature children. I find that a Kantian deontological perspective largely disapproves of children's involvement in reality television, and these objections are echoed by similar arguments from documentary ethics. A perspective from the utilitarian arguments of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, conversely, may in some cases approve or disapprove of children's participation in docu-soaps, depending on whether the production of these programs is seen to generally contribute to wider happiness. A utilitarian evaluation of the ethical goods and harms of docu-soaps production and reception has parallels with debates in documentary ethics over the function of documentary as a general public good.

In my second chapter, I reformulate popular journalistic criticisms of makeover programs *Snog Marry Avoid?* (BBC Three 2008–13) and *The Biggest Loser Australia* (Network Ten 2006–) along explicitly ethical lines via Kantian deontology and Julia Driver's hybrid of virtue and consequentialist ethics. I draw on theoretical perspectives regarding self-transformation and therapy culture in order to evaluate the moral and practical status of makeover programs' humiliation of subjects and their stated therapeutic projects. I argue that the individual subjects of these programs are deployed to reinforce dominant discourses regarding class, gender, national identity and neoliberal self-governance in the United Kingdom and Australia.

My third chapter studies three reflexive parodies of reality television, *UnREAL* (Lifetime 2015–), *Sex House* (Onion Digital Studios 2012), and *Nathan for You* (Comedy Central 2013–), to consider how and why these programs comment on perceived ethical problems in reality television and the format's status in wider culture. I refer to theories of parody, satire, and mockumentary programming, and argue that my case studies use

shocking depictions of reality television production in order to encourage audience scrutiny of their referent reality programs. Similarly to mockumentary programs, these case studies challenge reality programming's ability to present factuality, and emphasise differences of power between reality producer, subject, and audience to critique the form.

In this thesis, I argue that particular ethical issues in reality television reflect ideas and strategies embedded in reality television programming at a subgeneric level. I demonstrate the validity of Kantian deontology, utilitarian consequentialism and a hybrid consequentialist-virtue ethics framework as a means of identifying and assessing the validity of various ethical criticisms of reality television. These ethical criticisms, I argue, also circulate in popular culture, albeit at an implicit level. This study demonstrates the connection between the ethical study of reality television and the cultural and historical influences that characterise contemporary reality television.

Declaration by author

This thesis is composed of my original work, and contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference has been made in the text. I have clearly stated the contribution by others to jointly-authored works that I have included in my thesis.

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None.

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Keywords

reality television, ethics, reality programming, deontology, utilitarianism, ethical criticism, documentary ethics, makeover, mockumentary

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Introduction: Approaching Reality

> Reality television is the television of television.
> —Kelefa Sanneh

In June of 2017, production on ABC's *Bachelor in Paradise* (2014–) (a spinoff of the wildly-successful *Bachelor* series of reality television programs) was abruptly suspended and contestants were sent home. In a brief statement, *Bachelor in Paradise*'s production company, Warner Bros., attributed the sudden halt in production to "allegations of misconduct on the set." Over the following days, more details emerged from contestants, leaks, and rumours via social media: contestant Corinne Olympios alleged that she had been too intoxicated to consent to a sexual interaction with fellow contestant DeMario Jackson. Implied in these allegations was that the *Bachelor in Paradise* producers were negligent at best, and complicit at worst, in allowing what amounted to sexual assault under their supervision.

Popular reportage characterised the *Bachelor in Paradise* incident as yet another example of inappropriate, dangerous and immoral practice in reality television. In the *New York Times*, Jennifer Weiner commented: "[m]y surprise was not that production-halting misconduct took place, but that it has taken this long for something this bad to occur." Indeed, Weiner reflected, such lows were relatively commonplace in reality television. In a 1999 episode of MTV's *Real World* (1992–), subject Ruthie Alcaide was shown driving inebriated; rather than confiscating her keys, producers at the time chose to instead confront her the next morning and compel her to see an addiction counsellor. (Her treatment became an ongoing storyline for the remainder of the season.) In 2001, *Big Brother* (CBS 2000–) contestant Justin Sebik was ejected from the program after holding a knife to the neck of fellow contestant Krista Stegall. The reality television audience, Weiner noted, had continued watching, and "[n]ow viewers have to sit with our complicity."

Bachelor in Paradise is by no means the first of these controversies. Rather, it is the latest flashpoint in an ongoing moral debate surrounding reality television. This moral debate, media theorist Daniel Biltereyst observes, has at times emerged in response to a moral *panic*—a panic encouraged and sustained in part by reality television producers themselves (107–08). This debate is not merely a media obsession; the ubiquity of moral and ethical concerns is also an area of interest in reality television studies. Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn assert "the prominence and ubiquity of reality TV continues to inspire

serious ethical questions" (8). In her *Reality TV*, June Deery identifies pertinent ethical questions in the field:

> Does the programming unfairly trivialize, debase, or mock its subjects? [. . .] Is the participant's consent in all cases really informed and voluntary? Should children be involved? [. . .] Do pressures and exposure lead participants to divorce, psychological harm, even suicide? (11)

These questions are important, even outside of a pure production context. As cultural theorists Wendy Wyatt and Kristie Bunton observe in the introduction to their *Ethics of Reality TV*, "[t]he texts of reality TV are ethically laden, and they matter in ways that have real influence on our ethical lives. . . . Reality television – like all communication – helps shape the way we view and interact with the world" (2). As early as 2001, as reality television was gaining early prominence, Gay Hawkins noted that television from "docusoaps to reality TV to tabloid talk . . . is now deeply implicated in shaping our ethical sensibilities . . . *ethics* have become *entertainment*" (412).

While the ethical problems posed by reality television have consistently warranted mention—in broad overviews by Annette Hill, Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette, Su Holmes and Deborah Jermyn, and Beverley Skeggs and Helen Wood, to name a few—the generic and subgeneric focus of study found in these overviews is generally detached from formal ethical analysis. While Hill considers the ethical problems visible in particular reality programs, for example, she eschews ethical judgements of the programs themselves, instead focusing on how questions of ethics are negotiated *within* the program's narratives (*Audiences and Popular Factual Television* 108–34). Even in focused studies of individual reality subgenres, questions of production and distribution, political discourse, and viewing practices far outnumber those of ethics.

Conversely, ethical analyses of reality television can often seem detached from the contextual significance of the genre as a whole. This is not without good reason: as Wyatt and Bunton acknowledge, reality television is a complex collection of programs that precludes general answers to various ethical questions (3). The solution offered in their *Ethics of Reality TV* is to focus where possible on the particular—not merely individual programs, but individual seasons, episodes, and even contestants—and consider what these parts of reality programming say about ethics. In doing so, however, such ethical evaluation tends to exist in a vacuum without reference to how historical, cultural, and ideological contextual factors—as well as textual factors—are instrumental in shaping reality television at a generic and subgeneric level. In emphasising the uniqueness of

individual case studies, too, these analyses risk producing results disconnected from the cultural contexts of reality television.

Moral *judgements* in analyses of reality television remain uncommon or left implicit in scholarly work. There are several reasons for this, some methodological and some philosophical. Importantly, however, I argue that these reasons do not invalidate this thesis' mixed use of textual analysis and ethical analysis. Some methodological limitations to a mixed approach have already been acknowledged above: the breadth of reality television programming makes ambitious ethical analysis impractical and unrealistic. It would be very difficult, even unfair, to form an ethical judgement regarding even a single subgenre of reality television. Individual programs within the same subgenre may differ wildly in content and style. National contexts have significant influence on how a reality program looks and operates. Even individual episodes or seasons of the same program may differ from one another. One might argue that reality television as a whole is too variable to allow for often-rigid moral judgements. In response to this, however, I assert that textual analyses can nonetheless be useful in identifying trends or patterns across a group of programs. Consistent moral judgements of similar reality programs reveal something consistent about these particular programs; placing these judgements within the context of subgeneric analysis in turn suggests common traits that routinely produce the same judgements. The case studies chosen for this thesis are not exceptional examples of reality programs—rather, they have been chosen precisely because they are average, and often the most prominent incarnations of a particular subgenre of reality television.

A more general objection may be to question the relevance of reality television's ethics (or lack thereof). One might charge that the matter is already settled, or that the question of reality television ethics is in any case trivial or serves no purpose in a study of a cultural product. In the foreword to *The Ethics of Reality TV*, television critic James Poniewozik bluntly observes: "[t]he easy answer to the question: 'Is reality TV ethical?' is 'of course not'" (ix). This is however, as Poniewozik admits, an overly simplistic question and answer. Beyond the simple "no" to whether reality television is ethical or not are more productive questions. How can one prove that reality television is unethical beyond supposed common intuition? How can one systematise this process of judgement? And of more concern for this thesis: why are certain types of reality programs consistently ethically lacking?

This thesis aims to establish a middle ground in the ethical analysis of reality television, emphasising the importance of prototypical features of certain subgenres in

giving rise to particular ethical problems. I ask: how do the stylistic and narrative features of particular reality television subgenres create unique ethical problems for programs in those subgenres? How can normative ethical theories identify the source of these problems, and how these theories in turn inform judgements regarding the programs? Finally, how do popular (non-academic) analyses articulate criticisms of reality television, and how do these criticisms reflect broader ethical principles found in formal ethical analysis? My aim here is threefold. I argue that certain common characteristics of reality television subgenres are likely to consistently produce particular ethical problems. I also assess the relative merits of various theories of normative ethics as frameworks through which to evaluate reality television. Furthermore, I argue that popular, non-academic criticisms of reality television are implicitly based in ethical principles, which can be formalised according to Kantian deontological and consequentialist normative ethical arguments. In doing so, I aim to connect ethical evaluation of reality television case studies to the general study of reality television at a subgeneric level.

This thesis' ethical analysis is informed largely by the normative ethical frameworks of Kantian deontology and utilitarian consequentialism. 'Normative' here denotes that these ethical frameworks are intended to be prescriptive—they describe how human beings *ought* to act, and are intended to guide moral behaviour. As these frameworks are drawn from the field of moral philosopy, rather than cultural studies, some explanation of these ethical frameworks and their significance is necessary here for readers who may be unfamiliar.

Kantian deontology refers to a branch of act- or duty-based (as opposed to character- or outcome-based) normative ethics as conceptualised by German philosopher Immanuel Kant. Fundamental to Kant's deontology is that moral good exists *a priori* and is rational (akin to physics and other empirical sciences), and that human rationality is teleologically inclined towards moral goodness. Good will, Kant asserts, is the only thing that is necessarily always good in itself (*The Moral Law* 64). The fulfilment of duty—that is, acting in accordance with a good will even though it may be difficult—is thus the ultimate practical expression of moral good "under human conditions" (that is, in practical terms) (Paton 10). Kantian deontology thus posits that good actions are those which are done not merely in *accordance* with duty, but in *fulfilment* of duty; an action is only good if it is made *because* it is good. As a means of simplifying numerous duties into a general ethical principle, Kant devises the 'categorical imperative,' the absolute directive for ethical good: "I ought never to act except in such a way *that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law*" (emphasis original) *(The Moral Law* 74). *Maxim* in this case is a

general rule; when an individual decides to steal another's property, for instance, they act according to the maxim "it is acceptable for me to steal another's property." Universalised, this maxim becomes "it is acceptable for anyone to steal anyone else's property." Such a universal law would be clearly undesirable and unsustainable in a rational civil society, Kant would argue, and so the act of stealing is impermissible. Kant develops the categorical imperative into two further formulations: "[*a*]*ct in such a way that you always treat humanity . . . never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end*" (*The Moral Law* 106–7) (emphasis original), and "every rational being must so act as if he were through his maxims always a law-making member in the universal kingdom of ends" (118). Kant's framework of ethics equates rationality with moral goodness—an act is only good insofar as its general maxim is rational, while immoral acts are intrinsically irrational or self-defeating.

Utilitarian ethics are a branch of consequentialist ethics (those focused on the *consequences* of actions) which assigns ethical merit according to an action's creation of 'utility.' The exact meaning of 'utility' varies between authors; for the purposes of the arguments outlined in this thesis, however, utility is generally synonymous with 'happiness,' 'pleasure,' or 'well-being.' While proto-utilitarian frameworks are found in ancient and early modern history—notably Epicureanism—modern utilitarian arguments largely derive from those made by the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English philosophers Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill (who was inspired by Bentham). In *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Bentham asserts "[n]ature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure*. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do" (17) (emphasis original). Bentham argues that pleasure is the only feeling or principle that is intrinsically good (as opposed to Kant's good will), because all other feelings or principles exist in relation to creating pleasure and avoiding pain (*Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* 33). Mill describes utilitarianism thusly: "actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness" (11). Bentham and Mill's utilitarian arguments therefore aim to demonstrate how an individual can calculate the relative pleasure and pain created by a particular action.

Although Bentham and Mill's arguments are broadly similar—they both claim acting in an ethically 'good' manner is synonymous with the creation of utility—their frameworks of utilitarianism nonetheless differ on the exact nature of pleasure and what makes particular pleasures desirable. Both rely upon a process of addition and comparison; of a

given action, Bentham asserts, one must "[s]um up all the values of all the *pleasures* on the one side, and those of all the pains on the other. The balance, if it be on the side of pleasure, will give the *good* tendency of the act upon the whole" (emphasis original) (*Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* 39). Bentham does not distinguish between qualities of pleasure, merely quantity: "[p]rejudice apart, the game of push-pin is of equal value with the arts and sciences of music and poetry" (*The Rationale of Reward* 206). Mill, conversely, asserts that "some *kinds* of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others," and thus have greater weight in moral calculation (13) (emphasis original). Specifically, Mill argues, pleasures relating to "higher faculties" of human intellect are of higher quality, and thus more valuable, than 'lower' bodily sensations. Mill's reasoning for this distinction is ultimately circular: Mill claims that any individual who has experience with both high and low pleasures invariably prefers the former, while animals and "fools" (Mill equates the two) have only experienced the latter and thus cannot have an informed understanding (14–15).

I have chosen to employ these ethical arguments to a study of reality television for several related reasons: their prominence in academic and popular discourse, their relative simplicity, and their broad applicability. Both Kantian deontology and classical utilitarianism commonly feature in existing analyses of reality television; these arguments are used by several authors throughout *The Ethics of Reality TV*, including Christopher Myers, Edward Spence, and Bastiaan Vanacker, as well as in other sources. This suggests that there are some characteristics of these ethical arguments that make them suitable for this sort of analysis. One explanation is that Kantian deontology and utilitarianism arrive at what might be considered intuitive conclusions regarding moral behaviour—that human beings have particular responsibilities (or duties) towards each other that dictate how they ought to act, or that one's behaviour ought to contribute to greater human happiness—and the conclusions arrived at from these premises are convincing. The simplicity of these arguments is likewise appealing: a Kantian moral judgement can be arrived at simply by considering whether the relevant individual or individuals have acted according to duty, while a classical utilitarian need only consider how much and what kinds of happiness have been created by an act to appraise its moral value. Following on from this simplicity are these arguments' applicability to large-scale ethical problems. Because both Kantian deontology and classical utilitarianism evaluate aspects of an action outside of the actor themselves, these ethical arguments are easily applied to cases where an individual's motivations are not clearly known, or to broad groups of 'actors' (e.g. the collective producers of a reality program, or a reality television program's audience). This broad

applicability therefore makes these arguments suitable to case study approach of this thesis, where detailed insights into a moral actor's motivations and thought process may not be readily available.

I have chosen to employ Kantian deontology and classical utilitarianism as this thesis' main ethical frameworks for a variety of reasons, most of which are detailed above: these frameworks have established application in similar studies, they mirror common attitudes towards and discourse surrounding reality television ethics, their application is straightforward, and they are suitable for evaluating large and broad groups of moral actors. Finally, I would like to clarify that the application of these particular ethical arguments in this thesis is by no means intended to be exhaustive or definitive. This thesis aims to assess the suitability of various ethical arguments to the ethical evaluation of reality television and to demonstrate how these ethical arguments align with popular discourse surrounding reality television ethics. The application of Kantian deontology and classical utilitarianism is therefore intended to be a starting point, rather than a claim that these arguments are the best or only ways to study ethics in reality programming. This thesis aims to establish how future work in this vein—involving other ethical arguments or analysing other ethical issues—may proceed.

My first chapter concerns ethical problems involving children's participation in 'docu-soap' programming via analysis of the case studies *Extreme Guide to Parenting* (Bravo 2014) and *Toddlers & Tiaras* (TLC 2008–2016). While children participate in a variety of reality television programs, docu-soaps' focus on the intimate details of everyday life (akin to family documentary) poses unique concerns regarding children's agency, privacy, and representation in this subgenre. Because of the similarities between docu-soap and documentary, I engage with arguments from documentary ethics in this analysis. Two branches of normative ethics also inform this analysis, Kantian deontological ethics and the utilitarian consequentialist ethical frameworks of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. I argue that the involvement of children in docu-soaps often constitutes an ethical failing in itself due to the intimate focus of the docu-soap subgenre on its subjects' everyday lives. Because docu-soaps feature melodramatic narratives often tied around personal conflict, child subjects are especially vulnerable to being placed in situations that are uncomfortable or unpleasant. That these programs benefit from their child subjects' discomfort—or in any case from their physical or emotional labour—may constitute an ethical failing. Drawing upon arguments from documentary studies, I outline a number of ethical problems inherent in the filming and broadcast of vulnerable individuals' lives.

My second chapter analyses the 'makeover' subgenre of reality television—specifically, the subgenre's humiliation of subjects alongside the programs' self-identified therapeutic project. Of particular interest in this chapter is public response to these programs' use of humiliation and therapy, as evidenced by their coverage in journalism and opinion media. Two case studies form the basis of this analysis: *Snog Marry Avoid?* (BBC Three 2008–13) and the Australian adaptation of *The Biggest Loser* (Network Ten 2006–). In response to work on the makeover subgenre of reality television, I also consider the role of humour and playfulness in *Snog Marry Avoid?* with respect to the program's national (British) representations of gender and class as well as the competitive nature of *The Biggest Loser Australia* as a neoliberal project of self-governance. I argue that the use of humiliation and therapeutic discourse in makeover television presents recurring ethical problems for this subgenre within Kantian and consequentialist frameworks. I also argue that popular criticisms of both programs are ethical in nature despite often not being explicitly marked as so: popular objections to both programs typically emphasise the inappropriateness of reality television's use of humiliation and therapeutic discourse both in principle and because of its perceived effects. To illustrate this point, I engage with both Kantian deontology and Julia Driver's 'evaluational externalism' framework of normative ethics, which combines principles of both consequentialism and virtue ethics.

My third chapter interrogates popular parodies of reality television, specifically romance-based programming. My three case studies, *UnREAL* (Lifetime 2015–), *Sex House* (Onion Digital Studios 2012), and *Nathan for You* (Comedy Central 2013–), all critique apparent ethical problems in reality television through parodic techniques that combine both fictional and factual elements. I ask how these programs parodically employ reality television conventions of style and narrative in order to critique ethical problems in the genre, as well as how these case studies employ elements of factuality (a link to the historical real) in order to cue their audiences to recognise these ethical problems. In answer to these questions, I engage with scholarship on parody and mockumentary—a parodic genre that replicates the conventions of documentary, often in order to critique the form. As with mockumentary, I argue, the case studies analysed in this chapter replicate reality television conventions in order to critique perceived ethical problems in the genre. Specifically, these case studies address a perceived power imbalance between subject and producer in reality programs, particularly those associated with relationships. These parodic case studies assert a basis in the historical real in order to prompt their audiences to reflexively re-evaluate their understanding of the morality of reality television: *UnREAL* in its parallels to the experiences of co-creator Sarah Gertrude Shapiro, *Sex House*

because of its lack of clear parodic signifiers in early episodes, and *Nathan for You* because of its use of ostensibly unknowing subjects. In doing so, however, these parodies may themselves come under ethical criticism for the way in which they communicate their parodic meaning.

The study of ethics in reality television has implications beyond reality television itself. As one of the most widespread forms of television in contemporary society—despite its associations with American culture, reality formats are found throughout the Anglosphere as well as Europe, Asia, North and South America, Africa, and the Middle East—the global reach of reality television prompts similarly global questions of ethics and morality. The ethical analysis of reality television has implications for the continued study of ethics in mass art (in a descriptive sense of 'art' as cultural output). As Noël Carroll observes, "there is an apparent consensus . . . that responsible talk about mass art should address its moral credentials" (291). As one of the most ubiquitous yet culturally denigrated forms of mass art—"the television of television," as media critic Kelefa Sanneh contends in this introduction's epigraph—the ethical status of reality television demands serious analysis and poses signficiant implications.

Chapter One

"It's Harder to be a Kid:" Informed Consent, Agency, and Representation in *Extreme Guide to Parenting* and *Toddlers & Tiaras*

"I wanna tell the judges how beautiful I am," says Madisyn 'Maddy' Jackson. She is four years old, addressing the camera in a shy but honest manner. Maddy and her mother Lindsay are preparing Maddy's beauty pageant costume, the same outfit Lindsay wore as a child: a take on Dolly Parton, including a full-length pink dress and silver wig.

"When she wears the fake boobs and the fake butt," Lindsay says, adjusting Maddy's padding, "it's an added extra bonus . . . they all of a sudden realise that not only is she Dolly, she has the enhancements just like Dolly has." The camera obligingly zooms to a close-up of Maddy's padded buttocks. Mother and child practise Dolly poses. "Who are you?" asks Lindsay.

"Dolly."

"Dolly who?"

"Dolly Parton."

This chapter concerns the ethics of children's participation in reality television. The example above, taken from an episode of *Toddlers & Tiaras*, presents several apparent ethical problems involving a child's depiction on television. The scene might be considered inappropriate for a variety of reasons. One might wonder how willing Maddy Jackson's participation in the program is, or to what degree she is free to make her own decisions regarding her involvement. Also concerning is the potentially sexual undertones regarding her representation in the program, in which a young girl is given prosthetic breasts and buttocks and compared to Dolly Parton. This example, as well as the issues it raises, is examined in greater depth later in this chapter.

Two programs, *Extreme Guide to Parenting* and *Toddlers & Tiaras*, are the case studies for my analysis. I ask: how does the involvement of children in *Extreme Guide to Parenting* and *Toddlers and Tiaras* present ethical problems in these programs with regards to the issues of informed consent, agency, and representation? And similarly, how ought the involvement of children in *Extreme Guide to Parenting* and *Toddlers & Tiaras* factor into analysis of these programs within Kantian and utilitarian frameworks of ethics? Both case studies in this chapter belong to the 'docu-soap' subgenre of reality

programming, which bears strong similarities to documentary form; therefore, in answering these questions, I also engage with research from the field of documentary studies that similarly addresses ethical issues a factual form of programming.

I argue that the intimate focus of docu-soap programming—in which the private details of individuals' lives are depicted for the purpose of entertainment—poses particular concerns regarding consent, agency, and representation, which are heightened by children's involvement in this form of programming. When analysed according a Kantian deontological framework of ethics, the actions of the producers and parent subjects of *Extreme Guide to Parenting* and *Toddlers & Tiaras* toward their child subjects constitute severe ethical failings. Utilitarian consequentialist analyses of both programs produce more conflicted evaluations; an utilitarian perspective finds both ethical merit and flaws in both programs, and a final judgement depends on how significant each of these merits and flaws are to the broader creation of utility. These differing evaluations can be accounted for by arguments in documentary studies, which place ethical importance in documentarians' responsibilities towards their subjects (corresponding to a deontological framework), or the informative or educational value of a documentary work (corresponding to a utilitarian consequentialist framework).

I begin below with a brief definition of 'child.' I continue with an explanation of the docu-soap subgenre of reality program, to which both case studies of this chapter belong, and consider the subgenre's relationship to the documentary form. Due to the similarities between docu-soap and documentary, I then introduce arguments surrounding the issues studied in this chapter taken from the field of documentary studies, as these arguments will inform my ethical analysis of the case studies. For clarity, the chapter's analysis is organised according to the ethical issue at stake—informed consent, agency, and representation—rather than according to the case studies themselves.

Defining a Child

'Child' and 'children,' in the context of this chapter, is used in both a legal and philosophical sense. Legally, children are individuals under the age of majority—in most countries, this is at eighteen years old. The children featured in this chapter's case studies cover a broad age range, from pre-communicative infants to children younger than thirteen years old. They are all considered children: they are still physically, mentally, and emotionally developing. Being children, they are also considered to be more vulnerable than adults, and are owed special moral and legal protections. The designation of 'child' is

intended to be broad. It is informed by cultural and social norms (an individual who has reached the age of majority in one country may nonetheless be considered a child in another) and does not necessarily address the development of a single individual who may be exceptional for their age. On issues such as informed consent, agency, and (self-)representation, older children may complicate this designation. Older children such as teenagers may have a more-or-less complete understanding of certain procedures, and would (for example) be better able to control the manner in which they present themselves on television, although they would still rely on a parent or guardian to provide consent on their behalf for legal purposes. A useful definition of 'child' for this chapter is thus: a human being that is still physically, mentally and/or emotionally developing, who is below the age of eighteen (as a broad age of majority), and who is not legally independent (relying on a parent or guardian to act on their behalf).

The Docu-Soap Genre, *Toddlers & Tiaras* and *Extreme Guide to Parenting*

I acknowledge that reality television involving children is not in itself a strict subgenre of reality television—children participate in reality television programming in a variety of subgenres, from cooking competitions to prank programs. I have chosen to employ case studies from a reality subgenre that is controversial in its use of children due to what I consider to be inherent risks of the form: the 'docu-soap' (often also rendered as docusoap). Television theorist Frances Bonner characterises the docu-soap as "combining a documentary style of observation with a soap-opera narrative structure" (Bonner 25). Media scholar Susan Murray cites docu-soaps' borrowing from direct cinema in their "handheld camerawork, synch sound, [and] focus on everyday activities" with soap operas' "short narrative sequences, intercuts of multiple plot lines, mini cliff-hangers . . . and a focus on character personality" (67).

The docu-soap subgenre is among the earliest forms of reality television, emerging from experiments in television documentary such as *An American Family* (PBS 1973), *The Family* (BBC1 1974), and *Sylvania Waters* (ABC 1992), each of which were recognised for their blending of documentary aesthetics and soap-opera narrative. (Biressi and Nunn identify *Sylvania Waters* as the first program to be explicitly labelled a 'docu-soap' by popular media (64–7).) The docu-soap's emergence as a stable subgenre of reality television began in Britain in the mid-to-late 1990s with low-cost docu-soaps such as *Airport* (BBC Two and BBC One 1996–2008), *Driving School* (BBC One 1997), and *Paddington Green* (BBC One 1998–2001) used to fill out primetime programming blocks. These programs generally emphasised small-scale, everyday narratives; this was in

contrast to contemporaneous American reality programming, which relied on dramatic, contrived premises.

In a departure from the British docu-soap tradition of capturing the mundane, Deery notes, the recent trend of reality programming is "a heightened fascination with the exotic and eccentric, whether in terms of wealth, class, culture, religion, or physical abilities. Viewers are invited to observe the Other . . . without the impetus to improve or change them" (19). Both *Toddlers & Tiaras* and *Extreme Guide to Parenting* fit this niche; both the 'extreme' parenting philosophies and the subculture of child pageantry are marked as spectacle by their unusualness. In this manner, docu-soaps differ from what is conceived of as the traditional project of documentary. As media theorist Richard Kilborn asserts, docu-soaps are "more likely to provoke an amused chuckle than to produce new insights into the world and its workings. . . . The various attempts to employ the docu-soap format as a consciousness-raising device are . . . the exception rather than the rule" (102–3).

Toddlers & Tiaras is an example of popular docu-soap programming that embodies Kilborn's observation of broad appeal through familiar elements. *Toddlers & Tiaras* ran for six seasons between 2009 and 2013 on the TLC network. Each episode follows three families involved in child beauty pageants. Episodes of *Toddlers & Tiaras* are structured around multiple self-contained narratives comprised of three acts: an introduction to the episode's cast (usually at home) and a discussion of the pageant's theme, a second act set at the pageant in which a conflict is introduced (usually acting as a cliffhanger into the advertising break), and a third act showing the resolution of the conflict and the pageant judging and awarding of prizes. Some subjects, perhaps most notably Alana 'Honey Boo Boo' Thompson, have featured in multiple episodes, and the program has spawned several spin-off shows featuring child performers from the show, including *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* (TLC 2012–14) and *Cheer Perfection* (TLC 2012–13). As is common in docu-soap, *Toddlers & Tiaras* employs a mixture of observational footage and interview segments in which subjects comment on the narrative. These segments also serve to contextualise and explain elements of child beauty pageants to audiences who may be unfamiliar with the practices and jargon of the subculture. The child subjects of *Toddlers & Tiaras* are generally girls aged between two and thirteen years old—while pageants do include younger children, the subjects of *Toddlers & Tiaras* must be able to address the camera for talking head segments.

In contrast to *Toddlers & Tiaras*, *Extreme Guide to Parenting* aligns itself closer to the informative, documentary elements of the docu-soap subgenre. *Extreme Guide to*

Parenting first aired on the Bravo network in 2014 with a single-season run of six episodes. Promotional material on Bravo's *Extreme Guide to Parenting* web page labels the program as a 'docu-series' presenting "a candid and unfiltered look into . . . unique and unconventional" styles of parenting. Each episode follows one or two families who subscribe to niche parenting strategies, including a nomadic lifestyle and the use of 'hypno-therapy' on children. Episodes of *Extreme Guide to Parenting* also use a three-act narrative. In the first act, the families and their parenting styles are introduced and explained; parents provide commentary on why they subscribe to a particular parenting philosophy, while the children explain how the parenting style affects their upbringing. In the second act, the parenting style is challenged or complicated by members of the family or external pressures, exposing a potential fault in the parenting style. In the third act, the complication is resolved and the parenting style is either re-affirmed or adapted. The children of *Extreme Guide to Parenting* cover a broad age range, from sixteen months to seventeen years old.

Informed Consent

Perhaps the most common issue that arises in the involvement of children in reality television (and documentary, for that matter) is the notion of informed consent. 'Informed consent' is a term used in a variety of contexts, including scientific studies, but the use of the term in this thesis is derived mainly from documentary and legal studies. In both reality television and documentary studies, 'informed consent' is generally understood as a legal term informed by ethics. However, as communications scholar Madeleine Esch contends, consent that is *legally* given is not always *ethically* acceptable (44). Because informed consent law is based in ethical arguments, I will explain informed consent as the commonly-understood legal concept. A basic definition of 'informed consent' refers to the ability of a subject to properly consent to participate in a given activity. Traditionally, documentary theorist Calvin Pryluck asserts, this requires that consent is given freely, that the person consenting understands what they are consenting to, and that the person is "competent to consent" – that they have the mental capacity to provide consent in the first place (201).

This definition, of course, means that children *cannot* provide informed consent; young children and infants lack the capacity for long-term planning in order to reach an informed decision. In legal frameworks, the child's ability to consent is thus delegated to an adult—the child's parent(s) or guardian(s)—who can make a decision on the child's behalf until the child reaches the age of majority. Benjamin Shmueli, a legal scholar who has

written on legal-ethical issues in reality television, identifies the problem that arises from this arrangement:

> Even when parents or guardians approve a child's participation, it does not mean that they weighed all the considerations and repercussions or even that they acted in good faith and in the best interests of the minor . . . one can assume that a parent or guardian's signature . . . can also be detrimental to the child, even if there is some benefit in it. (318)

The problem of consent for children in reality television, Shmueli asserts, is that the adult who consents on behalf of the child may not truly act in the child's best interests. Accidentally or intentionally, parents risk unpredictable consequences: "[u]nlike participation in commercials or movies, in unscripted reality anything can happen, something parents and children do not always take into account" (Shmueli 318) This ethical problem is the focus of this section. The specific form this problem tends to take in reality television is parental self-promotion: when a parent (who has consented for their child) disproportionately benefits from their child's participation in reality television to such an extent that they have not acted in the child's best interests. This is, intuitively, an ethical concern; Kantian and utilitarian frameworks of ethics can help us determine whether this behaviour constitutes an ethical failing and why.

Reality television subjects' contracts are rarely made available publically, so this section will not consider the individual legal arrangements under which a child's parent has provided consent. Instead, this section considers the nature of consent in my case studies via narrative and dialogue in the case studies themselves. Elements of narrative and dialogue from both *Extreme Guide to Parenting* and *Toddlers & Tiaras*, in conjunction with supporting materials from outside of the programs, will provide support for my ethical analysis.

In his foreword to *Image Ethics*, Howard Becker problematises the popularly-held notion that individuals can provide truly informed consent: "no one ever knows exactly what they have agreed to, even in situations of consent involving highly informed people" (xiii). Becker argues that much of the work done by a given contract is implicit rather than explicit, relying on a "presence of mutual trust and goodwill" that may well not be present. The ephemeral nature of these agreements, documentary theorist Brian Winston argues, has historically been capitalised upon by unethical documentary filmmakers (187). Winston's notion of the 'consent defence,' wherein filmmakers refer to the participants'

original consent to absolve themselves of responsibility for unethical behaviour, is a common idea in popular conceptions of reality television; it may often be said that a disgruntled reality subject 'knew what to expect' and thus their complaints are invalid. In contrast, Winston identifies another form of the consent defence in the charge that documentary subjects may benefit as a result of their participation—a charge that likewise pertains to docu-soaps (187). Important to note here is that the consent 'defence' is not a true justification for unethical practices; that is, even if documentary (or docu-soap) subjects *do* benefit from their participation—even, Winston notes, if the subject willingly goes along with the producer's unethical behaviour for their own gain (188). These benefits do not truly justify the unethical behaviour in the first place. As such, Winston's position resembles a Kantian framework of ethics: unethical actions are unethical *in themselves*, regardless of outcome or the motivations of the actors.

Parent subjects in both *Extreme Guide to Parenting* and *Toddlers & Tiaras* often use their role in the program to promote interests that may not align with their child's. A prominent focus in *Extreme Guide to Parenting* is the interplay between parents' personal and professional lives. Subjects of *Extreme Guide to Parenting*'s fifth episode, "The Mind Controller & The Body Positive Baby," include Madison Young, a feminist pornographic actress, artist, and author, and her husband James Mogul, a pornographic director. Madison's career in particular is a focal point of the episode, as her "body positive" parenting style—involving the open discussion of genital anatomy and "hug[s] that involve . . . genitals" (as an explanation of sex) with her two-and-a-half year-old daughter Emma—is consciously connected to her history growing up in a conservative family and her subsequent career in pornography. The central conflict of Madison's storyline is her wish to bring Emma to her upcoming performance art piece—which is to launch her newly-released memoir, *Daddy*. Later in the episode, as Madison sets up for the performance, a large poster of the book cover is again prominently displayed on the wall of the performance space. James asks what the poster is, prompting Madison to again discuss the features of the book—Madison apparently not having told James about the book's existence. "Alright, that looks great!" James replies. A short while later, Madison reads an explicit (though censored) portion of the book aloud *to* James (and the viewer), prompting an argument over the appropriateness of bringing Emma to the performance. Madison's appearance on *Extreme Guide to Parenting* is even mentioned on *Daddy*'s official website, though in a tacit manner. A blog entry from February 2014 reads: "SF Gallery Launch

Party for Daddy! This was my first of many performance pieces that I'm doing that explores the themes of my memoir Daddy. Bravo TV actually documented this!"

Similarly, parents featured on *Toddlers & Tiaras* consciously acknowledge that the program may further their own 'brands' as well as those of their children. This conscious self-promotion occasionally comes at the expense of a child's wellbeing or dignity. One example is found in "Darling Divas – New York," the fifth episode of *Toddlers & Tiaras*' fifth season. Featured in this episode are Wendy Dickey and her daughter Paisley, who is three. Paisley is briefly introduced before a talking head interview with Wendy is shown, in which she discusses Paisley's history with pageants: "Paisley's competed in over sixty pageants, but it was definitely the *Pretty Woman* costume that put Paisley's name out there." Wendy is referencing an incident that arose after the broadcast of twelth episode of *Toddlers & Tiaras*' fourth season, in which Paisley was shown performing in a costume representing Vivian Ward (the sex worker character played by Julia Roberts in the 1990 Garry Marshall film), consisting of a blonde wig, tank top, skirt, and knee-high costume 'boots.' Although Paisley was not a significant part of the episode—only a brief clip of her introduction and performance were shown at the time—the segment triggered a media controversy; most visibly at the time, *The View* co-host Sherri Shepherd condemned Paisley's costume (and Maddy Jackson's Dolly Parton costume) as titillation for pedophiles. "People [were] saying that I was sexualising her," Wendy says, "but I made the outfit myself, the outfit was very non-revealing, and *she would not be as well-known if it were not for that costume*" (emphasis mine). Following this, Wendy reveals that Paisley's costume for this pageant has "has a biker theme to it," featuring a leather jacket and hat—and a pullaway skirt which Paisley removes, revealing leggings underneath. The audience is then introduced to Blake Woodruff, Paisley's agent, who explains "I met Paisley and her family about a year ago. Then they had some stuff happen in the media, and I said, y'know, it's my job then to turn that into something positive, make her money, make her into a brand and a superstar." This strategy appears to have worked: in 2014, Wendy Dickey published her memoir, *Living Vicariously Through my Daughter*, for sale as an ebook on the Amazon service; a significant advertising hook of the book is "[r]ead why [Wendy] REALLY dressed her daughter as the 'Hooker with a Heart of Gold' and learn what the media doesn't want you to know!" (Amazon). Paisley has also made minor independent film and music video appearances, as reported on her official Facebook page and IMDB entry. Her appearances in two *Toddlers & Tiaras* episodes alone also lead to other media appearances, as Paisley and Wendy appeared on *Good Morning America*, *Dr.*

Phil, and *Inside Edition* following her *Pretty Woman* and 'biker-inspired' costumes (to respond to the apparent controversy). The immediate concern is not merely the broadcast of a sexualised depiction of a child—an issue that is analysed later in this chapter—but that both Wendy and Blake seem to acknowledge they are consciously exploiting this public image for their own material gain.

The promotion of Madison Young and the Dickey family's personal brands in *Extreme Guide to Parenting* and *Toddlers & Tiaras* constitutes an ethical failing from the perspective of Kantian deontological ethics. Madison Young and Wendy Dickey have used their children as means to an end and have not acted in accordance with duty towards their children. "It can be argued," Pryluck asserts, "that a child's integrity is infringed when a parent or guardian makes these decisions [i.e. to consent on their behalf] without considering the child's wishes" (201). Pryluck's reference to the 'integrity' of the child arguably mirrors Kant's notion of a moral being's intrinsic value. Respecting the integrity of a subject, then, is to treat them as ends rather than mere means, in accordance with the second formulation of Kant's *categorical imperative*, to "always treat humanity . . . never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end" (*Moral Law* 106) This aligns with Kantian deontology, which asserts that parents have a duty to "make the child content with his condition so far as they can" (*Metaphysics of Morals* 64). This duty is itself derived from Kant's categorical imperative to "act upon a maxim that can also hold as a universal law," the basis of rational (and to Kant, good) action (*Metaphysics of Morals* 17). Within the framework of Kant's philosophy, an action is only good insofar as it is done *in the fulfilment of* duty, rather than merely in corresponding with duty; as Kant assets, "[a]n action done from duty has its moral worth, *not in the purpose* to be attained by it, but in the maxim [principle] according with which it is decided upon" (*Moral Law* 71). That is, a parent's duty towards their child is a required duty *in itself*, and parents ought to act in fulfilment of this duty rather than from other motivations.

While parents have a right of control over their child, this right is balanced by the parental duty to "develop [the child] both *pragmatically* . . . and *morally*" (emphasis original) (Kant *Metaphysics of Morals* 65). Appearing on reality television in such fashion, however, is of dubious benefit to a child's moral development. By consenting for their child to benefit themselves, these parents also violate the categorical imperative. The maxim of their action—that it is acceptable to use one's own children to further one's own interests—is self-defeating: taken to its extreme, parents would have no obligation towards the care of their children, the primary duty of a parent. Even if the children of *Extreme Guide to*

Parenting and *Toddlers & Tiaras* benefit from parental consent on their behalf, and are inarguably better-off, this consent is *still* immoral because it was not given out of parental duty.

The principal issue in these case studies, viewed from the perspective of Bentham's utilitarianism, is whether (in this case) Madison Young and Wendy Dickey's consent on behalf of their children will tend to produce pleasure or pain. It is reasonable to state that the *extent* of this potential pleasure or pain concerns at least the children, the children's parents, the docu-soap producers and staff (who benefit from the program's airing), the program's networks as a collection of individuals, and the viewing audience. This order roughly correlates also to the *proximity* of the pleasure or pain; the child's experience here seems central, their parents' experience at least adjacent, and then other related groups becoming decreasingly significant. One methodological limitation in applying Bentham's notion of utilitarianism is that the effects on the viewing audiences, or on the program's networks (consisting of numerous employees), seem so distant and difficult to calculate as to be essentially meaningless, unless one assumes *these particular* instances of parental consent have far-reaching consequences that affect all of society. It is difficult to make plausible claims about the creation of happiness or pain regarding thousands of anonymous viewers who potentially react to the programs in mixed or complex ways.

For the children's parents, however, the pleasures and pains that are created as a direct result of their actions are fairly clear: Wendy Dickey in particular has consciously used Paisley's public image to further her economic wellbeing, while Madison Young has also—at least minorly—used her child's role in a docu-soap program to promote her book and artwork. The immediate pleasure or pain of the respective children is less certain—neither Paisley nor Emma seem particularly upset because of their inclusion in the programs, and Paisley appears to actively enjoy the attention of the camera. One could reasonably claim there is potential for Paisley or Emma to feel humiliated by their appearances on the programs at a later time, though the duration and intensity of this pain is itself intederminate. (This particular sort of humiliation is considered further in this chapter's section on privacy.)

Based on Bentham's framework of utilitarian consequentialism, it would seem that parents' self-promotional consent on behalf of a child is at least a minor good. While there is potential for pain to be created as a result of this action, the indeterminate intensity and duration of this pain means it does not significantly outweight the immediate and direct

pleasures created by this use of a child's consent. Some notable objections could be made in response to this judgement. At the very least, Bentham's framework appears to disregard any notion of selfless parenting—what might be considered a crucial responsibility of parents to put their child's wellbeing before theirs. Bentham's framework of utilitarianism likewise suffers from the necessity of extensive moral calculation to determine whether a particular action is ethically meritous. This is also a shortcoming of applicability: Bentham's utilitarianism requires an analysis of how a given action affects each individual associated *with* the action and its effects—a difficult challenge given that this is an analysis of internationally-broadcasted programs (Bentham 39). Though Bentham qualifies that this ethical addition is not to be used for "every moral judgement," its application in these specific cases (the ethical status of which are significant to this analysis) is nonetheless unwieldy. Bentham's utilitarianism applies only to these *particular* cases—even an analysis of other subjects from *Extreme Guide to Parenting* or *Toddlers & Tiaras* would likewise require additional calculations and likely produce differing results. While this method of analysis enables nuance between individual cases, it provides little guidance with regards to children's participation in docu-soaps as a whole.

Children's Agency in Reality Television

Children's inability to provide informed consent is reflective of children's less-developed agency. This section deals with another aspect of children's agency—privacy—and the ethical problem of children's privacy in this chapter's two case studies. As privacy is a precondition for the free exercise of agency, and because children's agency is protected in part by a child's parent or guardian, the improper protection of privacy poses an ethical problem for child docu-soap subjects.

In simple terms, 'agency' refers to the capacity of an individual (an agent) to act. This capacity to act is a fundamental basis of human rights. Philosopher James Griffin describes agency as having four elements: the ability to choose an action ('autonomy'), "at least minimum education and information" to choose from potential actions in the first place, the capacity to carry out an action, and the ability to pursue said action without undue restriction from others ('liberty') (21). Based on Griffin's definition of agency, it is clear that children are not (yet) complete agents: children are generally limited in their ability to make decisions, they lack the same intellectual and physical capabilities to carry out actions as adults, and their actions are regulated far more than adults. Therefore, Griffin argues, children do not have the same rights as adults (where 'adulthood' is synonymous with 'personhood,' the status of being a fully-developed agent) (27).

Philosopher Robert Noggle deems children "'special agents,' who have simple agency but have not (yet) fully developed *moral agency*" (emphasis mine) (101). Griffin offers the idea of children as "acquiring rights in stages—the stages in which they acquire agency" as they develop, culminating in the age of majority as the child is recognised as an independent agent (28). While infants—who do not have agency—are therefore not protected by human rights (and children have, at the least, fewer rights than adults), Griffin clarifies that "this conclusion is compatible with our none the less having *weighty obligations*" towards them (emphasis mine) (28). A child's parent or guardian, Noggle argues, thus has a duty to not only address the child's material needs, but also to foster the child's "moral decency" for when they develop into an independent participant in the "moral community" (110).

A final clarification is necessary here in regards to this section's use of Kantian deontological ethics. It could be argued that because children are non-autonomous (i.e., they do not have fully-developed agency) and non-rational, they do not fall under Kant's notion of "personhood," which presupposes the two; Kant distinguishes between *persons* as having a rational nature, and *things* of a non-rational nature and thus have "only a relative value as means" (*Groundwork* 106). This objection has been addressed elsewhere along two main points. Firstly, as political scientist Mika LaVaque-Manty contends, rather than assuming "children are *not yet* agents," Kant's philosophy acknowledges "children are agentic very early on, but their agency is not the same thing as mature, rational adult agency" (emphasis original) (368). That is, children's agency is of a different kind to adult agency, yet still ethically valuable. Additionally, philosophers Allen Wood and Onora O'Neill observe, the good treatment of children is *in itself* a rational end (198); conversely, the maxim that that it is good to mistreat children, if universalised, is certainly self-defeating and irrational. Therefore, even if children themselves are not rational, autonomous agents, ensuring their wellbeing is nonetheless a duty towards rationality *as an end* (Wood 198). These clarifications, I believe, sufficiently support the idea that Kantian deontology is still applicable in the case of children.

Privacy is fundamental to agency—a lack of privacy, conversely, inhibits the ability of an individual to make free choices without the interference of others (see Griffin 21). Pryluck characterises the right to privacy as "the right to decide how much, to whom, and when disclosures about one's self are made" (198). The right to privacy, Pryluck argues, is "part of [a] broader right of personality, which includes *the right to be free of harassment, humiliation, shame, and indignity*" (emphasis mine) (200). Pryluck does not provide further

detail concerning who holds this right, though it implicitly extends to everyone, including children. Article sixteen of the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* likewise states "[n]o child shall be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with his or her privacy," and that children have "the right to protection of the law" to defend against this interference. (While Griffin may object that children do not have this specific right, a middle ground may be that parents at least have an *obligation* to reasonably protect their child or infant's privacy.) Pryluck argues that documentary ethics (and in this case, docu-soap ethics) must aim to strike a balance between an individual subject's right to privacy and a public right to know (200). This is the focus of this section: whether the producers of *Extreme Guide to Parenting* and *Toddlers & Tiaras* have made a reasonable (that is, ethical) balance between the privacy of their child subjects and the public's right to know.

This chapter's case studies depict family relationships (particularly between parent and child) and what is ostensibly everyday behaviour, frequently in the setting of the home. Within this intimate space, the boundary between the public's right to know (and reality subjects' right to share) and the privacy of the child come to the fore. In the sixth *Extreme Guide to Parenting* episode, "The Everything-on-Demand Baby," features Christian and Nate Axness and their daughter Ella. Throughout the program, sixteen-month-old Ella is frequently shown naked (with her genitals blurred). Early on in the episode, Ella is shown urinating in her chair. In another scene, as the Axnesses explain their 'elimination communication' toilet training strategy—in which the child is intended to use non-verbal communication to indicate a need for the toilet—a photo of Ella is displayed onscreen that depicts her naked and standing next to her own feces on the floor.

Although these scenes work within the program to explain the Axness family's parenting style, the program arguably goes too far in this effort. As Ella is not yet able to communicate, and presumably does not yet possess significant long-term thought, it is difficult to know how she may feel about these scenes in future. It is plausible, however, that in five, ten, or fifteen years from now, an older Ella watching this episode might feel humiliated by her intimate biological functions having been depicted on national television. In the United States, where *Extreme Guide to Parenting* is filmed and primarily broadcast, there are cultural taboos associated with bodily waste that could conceivably pose embarrassment for Ella. While Christian and Nate Axness are within their (legal) rights as parents to share this material with the producers without Ella's input, it intuitively seems inappropriate, or at the least short-sighted on the Axnesses' part. Now that the episode has been broadcast, additionally, nothing can be done if Ella Axness does eventually

come to regret her involvement in the program—her privacy is irrevocably breached by virtue of this footage being freely available on the internet without the possibility of retraction.

Toddlers & Tiaras similarly publicises aspects of its child subjects' private lives that arguably go beyond a reasonable right to know. In "Glitzy Divas," the fourth episode of the program's fifth season, eight-year-old Ever Rose and four-year-old Adriana's excess weight are central plot points for the episode; in the same episode, Adriana's mother Jade expresses concern to her pageant coach over Adriana's visible back hair harming her pageant score. In a later scene, extended footage of Ever Rose eating cake is comedically juxtaposed with her mother Kayla concernedly discussing Ever Rose's weight. Numerous quick cuts appear to show Ever Rose consuming large amounts of cake; in a talking head segment, Kayla impotently remarks "it's harder to be a kid if you're carrying a little extra weight around." Unmentioned by Kayla is that Ever Rose's extra weight is being brought to the attention of television audiences across the world.

While *Extreme Guide to Parenting* and *Toddlers & Tiaras*' subject matter is relevant to their parenting docu-soap premises, the manner in which the details of their child subjects' lives are depicted goes beyond a reasonable expectation of privacy. Toilet training is certainly an important facet of parenting and worthy of public discussion; the graphic nature of Ella Axness' own biological functions depicted onscreen arguably goes too far in conveying this point. In raising the issue of privacy in documentary film, Pryluck rhetorically proposes a scenario similar to that depicted on *Extreme Guide to Parenting* and *Toddlers & Tiaras*:

> A homey example that has touched just about everyone past a certain age is the pictures of naked babies on bearskin rugs . . . [t]o others the snapshot might be cute, charming, and delightful; to the now grown-up subject the picture might be something else. Does the adult who grew from the infant child have no rights, simply because the image exists? (199)

Even if a child's toilet-training is an integral part of a parenting style, a photograph of a naked child next to their own waste seems hardly necessary to impart this information. Likewise, even given that managing weight may be an important element in beauty pageant training, the flippant depiction of this challenge trivialises the issue for little more than comic effect. The children depicted, additionally, have no further control over their depiction (this issue is considered in further detail in the representation section of this

chapter). Esch recounts a similar problem in another docu-soap program featuring children, *Jon & Kate Plus 8* (now *Kate Plus 8*) (Discovery Health 2007–08, TLC 2008–):

> While most of us have the luxury of down-playing embarrassing childhood incidents or hiding the photos of our awkward tween years, child stars of reality television will not have this option as they grow up in the spotlight. Thanks to re-runs, DVD box sets, and a multitude of websites, they won't be able to outrun their parents' tabloid-fodder divorce or their own childhood tantrums [. . .] (51)

Esch specifically identifies the ongoing nature of breaches of privacy (and the humiliation they produce as a result) as particularly problematic in the case of child docu-soap subjects.

A deontological evaluation of *Extreme Guide to Parenting* and *Toddlers & Tiaras*' treatment of children's privacy is straightforward: the programs fail to respect the value of their child subjects. While the program's producers may be motivated by a desire to inform the public, their actions constitute ethical failings regardless of intented or actual outcomes. In Kant's framework, personhood is derived from "dignity," an "absolute inner worth" that commands respect from oneself and from other rational beings (*Metaphysics of Morals* 186). To disregard an individual's dignity is to disregard their worth. Kant distinguishes between "banter," ridicule that is based in admiration and is more acceptable, to "caustic mockery" done to "deprive [another] of the respect he deserves" (*Metaphysics of Morals* 212–13). Caustic mockery, "to expose others to laughter, to make their faults the immediate objects of one's amusement," Kant asserts, is a "serious violation of one's duty of respect for other human beings" and is thus unacceptable in his system of deontology (*Metaphysics of Morals* 213). Kant's notion of dignity echoes Pryluck's conception of privacy as part of freedom from "harassment, humiliation, shame, and indignity," several of which are plausibly brought on through the scenes examined above (Pryluck 200).

The primary concern of Millsian utilitarianism is the Greatest Happiness Principle. Pryluck's dichotomy of the right to privacy versus the public's right to know must thus be translated into a weighing up of outcomes with respect to the creation of happiness. On this (very basic) metric, it would at first seem that these programs *do* create a net positive happiness. While the programs tend to create pain for their subjects now or plausibly at some point in the future—the pain associated with one's privacy being violated (that is, shame and humiliation)—they also create pleasure for their viewing audiences, who vastly

outnumber the individuals who have been depicted, and for the programs' producers and related staff, for whom the programs are their source of income (and thus a source of other pleasures). This interpretation also presents valid objections: namely, that the wellbeing of a small group of vulnerable individuals has been minimised in favour of pleasure in a dispersed, general sense. One might further object that this simplistic approach to establishing the Greatest Happiness sets a bad precedent, in that the agency of a minority could reasonably be sacrificed for the pure pleasure of a larger group in future. It might be reasonable to consider these conclusions unjust. These are relevant concerns in Millsian utilitarianism, and so bear some further consideration.

While the Greatest Happiness Principle is the primary calculus of Millsian utilitarianism, Mill nonetheless qualifies hypothetical cases in which the creation of pleasure interferes with the rights of others—such that an act that creates pleasure in a general sense may still be unacceptable within the utilitarian framework. Rights, Mill claims, are justified "by general utility"—that is, rights tend to create happiness and avoid the creation of pain at a general level (61). Accordingly, one could reasonably state that in contemporary society, children have a general right to privacy in a moral sense (though Griffin may dispute this particular right): the ability to live a private life, to withhold details of one's life from the public, tends more to promote the creation of pleasure than does the reverse. This moral right to privacy is supported in both cultural norms and legal frameworks, such that infringements of an individual's privacy without good purpose is typically subject to social reproach. In Mill's words, this constitutes justice: it entails "a rule of conduct, and a sentiment which sanctions the rule" (59). In contrast, the Ella Axness case above (as an example) seems unambiguously a breach of Ella's moral right to privacy on behalf of both her parents and the *Extreme Guide to Parenting* producers—the depiction of one's own bodily waste on national television is of dubious merit to the creation of pleasure, in contrast to the relatively minimal loss of pleasure that would result in *not* including this segment. The discussion of Adriana and Ever Rose's weight in *Toddlers & Tiaras*, in addition, disregards their own right to keep these details of their childhood from wider society. Because society has a general interest in preserving the right to privacy of children, furthermore, it is plausible that such breaches of privacy—in transgressing against this right—contribute to the creation of pain on a broad scale.

Sexual Representations of Children in *Toddlers & Tiaras*

The docu-soap (and reality television generally) draws associations with documentary via a shared claim to a representation of reality. Representation in this case refers to what Bill

Nichols calls “an *argument* about the historical world,” a mode of reinterpretation and re-presentation that aims to achieve a specific “likeness” of the real (emphasis original) (111). Because documentarians can never produce a truly objective account of society, documentary theorist Jay Ruby argues, “the maker of images has the moral obligation . . . to never appear to produce an objective mirror by which the world can see its ‘true’ image” (210). That is, Ruby argues documentary filmmakers must acknowledge that their work presents a *representation*, rather than a claim to objective truth. Ruby identifies three intersecting “moral issues” of factual filmmaking: the filmmaker’s own artistic integrity in presenting *a* view of the world, the filmmaker’s responsibilities towards their subject, and their responsibilities toward their audience (211). In this section, these are issues of representation: how the filmmaker acknowledges their own role in representing the world, how the filmmaker responsibly represents their subject (and how the subject is permitted to represent themselves), and how the filmmaker leads their audience to recognise their representation of the world.

This section considers a particularly problematic representation of children in docu-soap programming: the sexualisation of children in *Toddlers & Tiaras*. This is an issue of representation, but likewise has clear connections to the broader issues of informed consent and children’s privacy. As has been established, the children who appear on *Toddlers & Tiaras* are unable to provide consent, yet parents may receive tangible benefits in return for consenting on behalf of their child. The sexualisation of children is likewise a matter of privacy, insofar as the child subjects on *Toddlers & Tiaras* may in future plausibly object to these images being made public.

Docu-soap programs generally do not direct focus to the producer and crew’s role in constructing the program; the audience is consequently directed to accept the program’s presentation of events as authentic. The honest and fair representation of docu-soap subjects, therefore, is an important ethical consideration. Pryluck asserts an ethical obligation of filmmakers “not to deform the subjects’ persona for selfish motives” (205). This is particularly the case, Pryluck asserts, for those “who [are] vulnerable and could suffer as a result of being filmed” (206). Young children and infants are generally unable to control their involvement in docu-soaps; likewise, the unethical representation of children may exacerbate breaches of children’s privacy. Children are vulnerable subjects whose representation is a matter of ethical importance, and the sexualisation of children in particular is a signiciant ethical problem.

The American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualisation of Girls (hereafter APA Task Force) recognises four conditions in defining 'sexualisation' as distinct from "healthy sexuality:" when "a person's value comes only from his or her sexual appeal," when "a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness . . . with being sexy," when "a person is sexually objectified . . . [and] made into a thing for other's sexual use," and when "sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person." The fourth element is "especially relevant to children," though others can be present in cases of child sexualisation (1). A variety of cultural, social, and psychological reasons for child sexualisation to be inappropriate are recognised by the APA Task Force and wider society, and these reasons contribute to the morality and ethics of the sexualisation of children.

Societal attitudes towards sexualised children are in part founded on the notion of childhood innocence—that childhood is a space of an individual's life separate from a sexual, adult space. Empirical evidence, furthermore, suggests that the sexualisation of children leads to negative impacts on individuals and society at large. The APA Task Force reports that sexualisation of girls may affect cognitive processes and self-esteem in both those girls affected and in observers, as well as negatively shaping attitudes towards sexuality (24–25). As Christina Hodel asserts, "[c]ompetitors on [*Toddlers & Tiaras*], through the gendered transformation they endure, may learn that their value comes from their sex appeal or gendered behaviour" (126). Consumption of content featuring sexualised children, furthermore, shapes beliefs of adult audiences (male and female) and perpetuates problematic discourses of gender and sexuality. Media critic Jennifer Pozner asserts a connection between *Toddlers & Tiaras*' sexualised depiction of children and broader concerns regarding women's self-representation: "[m]any women never outgrow these prescriptions for cosmetic and behavioral inauthenticity" (76). In this case, Hodel and Pozner's arguments reflect a consequentialist notion of ethics (that is, one explicitly concerned with outcomes)—though not a strictly utilitarian one.

The sexualisation of children in *Toddlers & Tiaras* is exacerbated by the children being unable to control their representation (which is also a problem of child subjects' agency). Lucia Palmer cites *Laguna Beach*, a docu-soap featuring high school seniors, as one example of this tendency; in a special finale episode, a fan of the program answers questions about subject Kristin's sex life to win a prize. Palmer observes that "Kristin's sexual activity and persona as a wild child are commoditized by MTV . . . and Kristin is powerless to control her public representation" as a result of being on the program (139). In this example, Kristin's public image has been taken control of by the docu-soap

producers and manipulated into an unfair or inaccurate representation. While adult subjects may have the means to offer counter-narratives to those presented by the program through engagement with the media, this opportunity may not be available to children without the support of a parent or guardian.

The sexualised images of young girls in *Toddlers & Tiaras* emerge from the context of American child beauty pageants, which commonly feature suggestive costumes and routines. The point of difference, however, is that *Toddlers & Tiaras* is broadcast to a wide, unspecialised audience who may not be familiar with the subculture of child beauty pageantry. Sociologist Hilary Friedman takes up this point in *Slate*, arguing that elements perceived as sexual on *Toddlers & Tiaras* are not seen as such within child beauty pageantry:

> Within that world, [suggestive routines] are just seen as "cute," not sexual, and are what you must do in order to win the biggest crown. They are just moves. But that shared understanding in the pageant ballroom isn't present in the wider world, and once these routines are broadcast to a wider audience, they are rightly seen as having sexual elements in them—batting eyelashes, blowing kisses, and thrusting hips. Which is why allowing young children to be on these television shows is problematic.

Friedman thus asserts that suggestive elements are merely a part of pageant culture, and that the problem of *Toddlers & Tiaras* is in the program's transmission to an audience that does not understand the context of the routines. While I would dispute the claim that sexual moves are innocuous within the routines and only become suggestive when viewed out of context, Friedman's argument that the broadcast of *Toddlers & Tiaras* is the point of ethical contention for the program is sound for the purposes of this section. Aspects of *Toddlers & Tiaras* that are discussed in this section, then, should be considered as points of ethical analysis in the context of their being broadcast to a non-specialist audience that does not interpret the images shown in their original context.

Toddlers & Tiaras often features costumes, behaviours and dialogue of a suggestive nature. Maddy Jackson's Dolly Parton costume from eleventh episode of the program's fourth season, "Hearts and Crowns," is one such example. Interestingly, in one segment, Maddy's stylist Michael criticises the outfit: "I wasn't a big fan of the outfit with the boobs in it . . . she's very young, but hopefully the judges will perceive it in good taste." The inclusion of this dialogue can be seen as an acknowledgement of the costume's

controversial nature not only by Michael but also the producers. Michael's objection is ultimately negated, however, in light of the scene that immediately follows: a montage of routines from the zero- to three-years-old category including one young girl wearing a bikini. A comment from the judge that "we all thought [Maddy's costume] was cute" appears to undercut Michael's comments about the appropriateness of the outfit entirely. The arrangement of these three scenes suggests a conscious effort from the producers of the program to control audience interpretation of the outfit—Michael's concerns mirror those potentially held by the television audience, but the judge's comments that immediately follow appear to counter these apparent objections. In effect, the program rationalises Maddy's performance as "just moves" (Friedman).

Another questionable example comes from "Las Vegas: LalapaZOOza." Erica and Vince, parents to five-year-old Ava, are acknowledged to be owners of a call-out exotic dancer business, and Ava is commonly shown interacting with her parents' employees. At times, the episode plays up the connection for comic effect. In one scene, Ava climbs over her mother and giggles while her mother speaks to a client on the phone: "they have nice, tight, toned little bodies, great [censored by the program], nice [censored], you'll be very very impressed with them." The composition of the scene draws an uncomfortable comparison. The climax of the storyline, Ava's lion-themed peageant routine, features her dancing in and around a cage. As Ava climbs to the top of the cage and performs a side split, the camera cuts to show three of Erica and Vince's employees in the crowd cheering. Again, Ava's gymnastics and physicality is associated with the work of an exotic dancer despite its apparently innocuous context. In the same episode, six-year-old Elizabeth is briefly shown commuting to the pageant in a special function bus outfitted with a dancing pole, which she spins around on—yet again making a direct comparison between the young girl and an exotic dancer. While these scenes are all played for comic effect, they nonetheless work to sexualise the girls through associations with sexualised activity. As Palmer asserts, "*Toddlers & Tiaras* packages [sexualised] behaviour as cornball and playful, but it is nonetheless sexual and reflective of public imagery of eroticized children" (133). The capture, reinterpretation and presentation of this imagery in the program, unintentionally or not, clearly sexualises its child subjects, and in doing so invites ethical criticism.

A Kantian deontological analysis of the sexualised representation of children in *Toddlers & Tiaras* finds the practice wholly unacceptable. Because *Toddlers & Tiaras* associates its child subjects with sexual qualities, normalises sexualised elements of child

beauty pageants, and broadcasts sexualised content to an audience that does not understand the required contextual information, the program disrespects the value of its subjects and audience. Children, by virtue of their humanity, possess an inherent dignity, and it is a duty of humanity to respect the dignity of others (Kant *Metaphysics of Morals* 186). Kant asserts, furthermore, that rational individuals have a "duty, but only a negative one" to promote others' "moral well-being"—that is, while individuals are not obligated to protect another from "grief, fear, or any other state of [moral] suffering," they do have a duty to prevent others from circumstances that could conceivably bring about these pains (*Metaphysics of Morals* 156). The acknowledged effects of the sexualisation of children, including issues of guilt and self-esteem, places this sort of representation into this category. Producers and parents, therefore, are morally obligated to prevent the cultivation of these negative emotions, and by extension the practice of children's sexualisation. It is worth clarifying again that the basis of *Toddlers & Tiaras*' ethical failings from a deontological perspective is not the eventual effects *themselves*, but rather that the prevention of these effects constitutes a duty of virtuous beings. Analysis from a Kantian perspective, therefore, finds the practice of sexualisation of children on television (and in general) unacceptable, because placing children into an environment where they plausibly may be sexualised violates duty.

An analysis of *Toddlers & Tiaras*' sexualised representation of children from the perspective of Bentham's utilitarianism produces an ambiguous judgement. This is in part because of the nature of Bentham's utilitarianism, which requires consideration of the potential pleasure and pain created by the act for all of those involved. Starting, as Bentham suggests, with "those whose interests seem most immediately to be affected by it," in this case the children, the act of being sexualised carries strong *potential* to create pain for the child. The APA Task Force reports that girls introduced to an "objectified perspective" consequently internalise "a third-person perspective on the physical self," with this self-monitoring linked to issues in self-esteem and identity formation through adolescence (20). While the children featured in the examples above are quite young, their sexualisation in *Toddlers & Tiaras* and their pageants lays the groundwork for internalised self-objectification as they develop. The program's role in this event is in the transmission of these sexualised images to a wider audience, and subsequently the child's knowledge of this large audience of viewers further contributing to self-objectification (in connection to a wider concern regarding breaches of privacy). While the pain created by sexualisation on *Toddlers & Tiaras* is fairly remote—the impact of this sexualisation may not affect the

child's identity formation until adolescence, years from now, if it is consciously felt at all—the pain associated with self-esteem issues may have a long duration and a significant intensity. This pain, moreover, has the potential to create further pain: sexualisation-related issues of self-esteem have been shown to affect long-term school results, interpersonal relationships and the growth of mental health problems (APA Task Force 21–24).

The pleasure or pain experienced by *Toddlers & Tiaras*' audience as a result of this problematic sexualisation of children, however, is less apparent. The program's broad dissemination means that while the act of sexualising children may produce relative pleasure or pain, this response is in any case uncertain and remote. While evidence finds that the widespread sexualisation of children produces generally negative mental health outcomes for individuals, for example, it is not clear how significant *Toddlers & Tiaras*' contribution *is* to the sexualisation of children in wider society. Although *Toddlers & Tiaras* may contribute to a general sexualisation of children (and subsequently produce pain), it is difficult to ascertain whether the pain associated with this improper representation of children negates the various pleasures associated with the audience's *viewing* of the program. Bentham's framework of utilitarianism does account for these differences of pleasure and pain; specifically, the cirumstances of the respective pains of those immediately affected (i.e., the child subjects) seem more significant than the relatively remote and fleeting pleasures that are created for the program's audience (Bentham 38). While this is a plausible interpretation of Bentham's framework, this judgement is nonetheless difficult to reach; Bentham's method for calculating the moral worth of an act is merely to tally the respective pleasures and pains created for all involved (39), posing the potential for the sexualisation of children (which seems an intuitively wrong act) to nonetheless be acceptable if it creates happiness for a large number.

Conclusion

The involvement of children in *Extreme Guide to Parenting* and *Toddlers & Tiaras* poses serious ethical problems with regards to informed consent, privacy, and the representation of children. These problems are also informed by the characteristics of the docu-soap subgenre, which narrativises the private, everyday lives of its subjects. Because children are vulnerable subjects, and because docu-soaps tend towards melodramatic narratives that place their subjects in stressful situations, the involvement of children in this style of program presents intrinsic challenges for reality television producers.

Analysis of these case studies within a Kantian deontological framework of ethics finds the programs' use of children to be largely unacceptable—by virtue of their use as part of a docu-soap narrative, the producers of these programs (as well as, on occasion, the children's parents) have not acted out of duty towards the children's wellbeing, and have used the children as means to an end. This latter point—that children are used as means to an end—is a particularly common conclusion within analsysis of both case studies, problematising the notion that docu-soap programming could be produced in a manner acceptable within Kantian ethics.

Utilitarian evaluations of these programs give more ambiguous results, often depending upon the identification of some degree of pleasure created by the programs' production, though providing no clear conclusions regarding the programs' overall value or lack thereof. Of particular note is that, due to the wide distribution of docu-soap reality programming (and thus the programs affecting a potentially massive number of individuals), utilitarian frameworks cannot adequately account for creation of pleasure or pain on such a large scale. The special status of children in society poses an additional problem for analysis of this chapter's case studies within Bentham's framework of ethics, as this framework of utilitarianism does not regard children's pleasure or pain differently to that of adults. An act that creates pain for an individual child, yet creates pleasure for a greater number (i.e., a reality television audience), might thus be considered ethically acceptable from a utilitarian position—a conclusion that seems intuitively problematic. Because utilitarian ethical judgements are only made through an analysis of the specific outcomes of a *particular* act, furthermore, these frameworks lack broad applicability—while an individual act within a reality program may be unethical, this judgement does not necessarily apply to other programs, or even other episodes of the same program.

The use of documentary scholarship in this chapter, in conjunction with arguments from reality television studies, has been used to define and characterise the problems of informed consent, privacy, and the representation of children. While these problems have parallels in other factual forms of programming, the specific narrative requirements and production contexts of docu-soap programming—the goals and methods of which at times differ significantly from documentary—cause these problems to manifest in alternative ways. These arguments from documentary studies also contextualise the use of Kantian deontological and utilitarian consequentialist frameworks of ethics, as fundamental principles of both of these frameworks are used in documentary ethics. While children's involvement in docu-soap programming is relatively minor compared to that of adult

subjects, the ethical issues that arise from their participation nonetheless warrant significant attention and pose serious implications for reality television producers, parent subjects, and audiences.

Chapter Two

"Just Unhappy with Myself:" Humiliation and Therapeutic Discourse in *Snog Marry Avoid?* and *The Biggest Loser Australia*

This chapter studies the use of humiliation and therapeutic discourse in the 'makeover' subgenre of reality television and considers the ethical problems posed by this combination of humiliation and pseudo-therapy. Two programs act as case studies for this analysis: *Snog Marry Avoid?* (BBC Three 2008–13), and the Australian version of *The Biggest Loser* (Network Ten 2006–). I ask: how are humiliation and therapeutic discourse employed in *Snog Marry Avoid* and *The Biggest Loser*? How does their use of humiliation and therapeutic discourse affect their ethical value within deontological and consequentialist ethical frameworks? And how does popular non-academic coverage from news, magazines and blogs characterise these problems? Both case studies also invite sub-questions to address issues specific to the programs: how does the use of irony and play affect ethical evluations of *Snog Marry Avoid?* Furthermore, how do the use of competitive elements in *The Biggest Loser Australia*, as well as its position in an Australian context, inform the ethical valence of the program? The makeover subgenre is frequently criticised in popular media on multiple grounds—that makeover programs humiliate their participants to an unacceptable degree and promote flawed or unrealistic notions of health, gender, or individual identity. These criticisms are ethical in nature, though often not explicitly recognised as such. Through the application of ethical frameworks, this chapter demonstrates the ethical principles that underpin public criticisms of these case studies. I argue that humiliation in makeover television acts as part of the subgenre's conception of therapy; highly public performances of confession, as well as self- and externally-imposed displays of contrition, are regarded as the foundation of (quasi-medical and quasi-spiritual) therapeutic transformation and 'recovery.' I argue that this notion of humiliation-as-therapy, common in these programs and other makeover programs, presents inherent ethical problems when viewed from Kantian and certain consequentialist positions.

Critics of makeover television may deem the subgenre's use of humiliation and therapeutic discourse toward its subjects as inappropriate *in itself* (along Kantian lines) or because of real or perceived consequences (from a consequentialist perspective). *Snog Marry Avoid*'s playfulness or ironic voice influences these ethical responses in two opposing ways. Firstly, the use of irony may be seen as a self-reflexive critique of the program's apparent endorsement of hegemonic standards of beauty. Secondly, the use of irony may be seen as an attempt to make the program's ethical problems acceptable

through the use of humour—that is, the program aims to create distance between its stated and real objectives, which may potentially ameliorate what would otherwise be considered ethically flawed motivations or outcomes. *The Biggest Loser Australia*'s competitive mode of transformation, which situates weight loss in a context of winners and losers, may similarly be criticised in a deontological fashion as an inappropriate notion of transformation that fails to respect the dignity of its subjects. Critiques of the program rooted in consequentialist arguments may either approve of the program for enacting real change in its contestants' and viewers' behaviours, or disapprove of the program for failing to achieve positive outcomes. Analysis of the program from the perspective of Julia Driver's evaluational externalist ethics can assess the merit of these claims.

Makeover Television

This chapter analyses *Snog Marry Avoid?* and *The Biggest Loser Australia*, two programs from what is often called the 'makeover' or 'transformation' subgenre of reality television. As is common in reality television studies, the generic boundaries of makeover television are not strictly defined and individual programs may have significant differences between each other. The single common element of makeover television, as the name suggests, is a process of improvement and change. While the focus of both *Snog Marry Avoid?* and *The Biggest Loser Australia* is change of individuals' external appearance—through fashion choices and weight loss, respectively—other makeover programs may feature 'makeovers' of domestic spaces (as in *Changing Rooms* (BBC One and BBC Two 1996–2004)), personal possessions (*Pimp My Ride* (MTV 2004–07)), or combinations thereof (*Queer Eye* (Bravo 2003–07) transformed individuals' presentation, behaviour, taste, and living space). Central to the makeover subgenre, Frances Bonner asserts, is "the unsatisfactoriness of the original state and the greater desirability of the new," where change is equated with progress and self-improvement (130). While individual programs in the makeover subgenre may vary wildly, this emphasis on the imperative to change has defined the subgenre since its first incarnations.

While makeover television resembles 'lifestyle television,' reality television scholarship generally emphasises the points of difference between the two forms. Whereas lifestyle programs ostensibly serve an informative purpose by emphasising the process of transformation and acting as a model of the process for audiences to emulate, makeover programs emphasise the final product, particularly through emotional reveals and surprises. Lifestyle programs devote the most time to an explanation of what is happening and why (explaining the process and its rationale) while makeover programs

focus on how the subject (or their property) has changed and how they feel about it. Helen Powell and Sylvie Prasad observe that in comparison to British lifestyle programs of the 1950s and 1960s, “makeover TV of the 21st century . . . emphasizes a shift to an end result rather than the processes involved” (58). Bonner further identifies this privileging of results in makeover television: “whole steps [of the transformation process] can be omitted in the knowledge that most viewers will never attempt to emulate the expert . . . more than how to make a pergola, viewers are led to focus on the surprised recipient’s reaction to the pergola” (131–132).

Cultural theorist Marsha Cassidy identifies the earliest instances of makeover television (although the term ‘makeover’ did not exist at the time) in the American television market in the period following the Second World War (127). Programs such as *Individually Yours* (WGN 1949), *Your Beauty Clinic* (KPIX 1949), and *Glamour Girl* (NBC 1953) established the format for makeover programs decades down the line by featuring advice dispensed by cosmetics experts, integrated advertising of beauty and fashion products, and a focus on ‘everyday’ subjects transformed into new and improved individuals. *Glamour Girl* even incorporated a quasi-competitive element: multiple women would present their personal hardships as evidence for their need to be made-over, and the studio audience (made up almost entirely of women) would vote on which woman would receive the make-over via applause (Cassidy 125–126). The fantasy of the Hollywood makeover, Cassidy observes, acted as a therapeutic means of working through personal anxieties via the transformation of the exterior self. The unique social upheaval of the post-war 1950s, combined with television’s temporal immediacy and visual fidelity, intensified the perceived therapeutic nature of the makeover beyond similar formats that had previously featured in print and radio (Cassidy 127). In doing so, social and economic anxieties among 1950s American women were reconfigured into a therapeutic project of self-care that shifted the site of work to the self. It is from this early media context that makeover television has evolved.

Self-care, “Technologies of the Self,” and Neoliberal Governance

Makeover discourse does not originate in reality television. The precepts of makeover television—that self-attention and self-maintenance are critical for personal, ethical, and spiritual development—are the continuation of a broader set of beliefs and practices concerning the self. Philosopher Michel Foucault dubs this set of beliefs and practices the “cultivation of the self . . . dominated by the principle that says one must ‘take care of oneself’” (*Care of the Self* 43). This project of the self, “so as to transform, correct, and

purify oneself, and find salvation," relates to philosophical notions of perfecting the individual's body, mind, and soul (42). While the cultivation of the self was historically limited to the cultural elites of these societies—those with the privilege of time and resources with which to practice this inward-facing project—discourses of self-care have become widespread since in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. A variety of factors have prompted this shift, though two are particularly relevant in the case of this chapter: the rise of liberal (in the nineteenth century) and neoliberal (particularly since the 1980s) ideologies of the relationship between the state and those it governs, and the deployment of mass media forms in advancement of these ideologies. Foucault labels these 'procedures, practices, and formulas' of self-care "technologies of the self," means and tools through which the individuals may 'govern' themselves, "so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality" ("Technologies of the Self" 18).

Snog Marry Avoid? and *The Biggest Loser Australia*, as technologies of the self, also function within neoliberal logics of governance. 'Neoliberalism' here refers to a specific economically- and politically-based mode of governance characterised by the restructuring of governmental functions along market-based logics. As sociologist Nikolas Rose asserts: "[a]ll aspects of *social* behaviour are now reconceptualized along economic lines – as calculative actions undertaken through the universal human faculty of choice" (emphasis original) (141). At a social level, neoliberal governance transforms notions of citizenship into the function of the exercise of choice of private services, rather than the relationship between state and citizen—what Laurie Ouellette and James Hay call "governing at a distance" (2). Communications theorist Terry Flew elaborates likewise connects neoliberal ideology to the capitalist basis of "the enterprise form as a model for society as a whole; legal and regulatory frameworks that promote competition" (64). The notion of competition (as an element of capitalist economics) persists in reality television, in which competition-based programs are common—including *The Biggest Loser Australia* in this chapter. Makeover television acts as one means through which citizens may govern themselves through consumption of a self-care product. Ouellette and Hay observe that the proliferation of "reality-based health- and nutrition-related programming is one example of TV's enlistment to resolve the dilemma of citizens who do not make the 'right choice' when assigned the rational responsibility of their own governance and self-care" (87). Within this neoliberal approach to self-governance, the 'right choice'/'wrong choice' binary is medicalised through therapeutic discourse; in the logic of makeover programs, 'wrong choices' are made not because of large-scale structural weaknesses (such as inadequate

education or state support mechanisms), but because of perceived psychological or decisional shortcomings affecting choice. Within this model, therapeutic discourse acts as a rationale for the program's intervention; subjects' inability to make correct choices reflects psychological or emotional defect, and makeover television in turn provides guidance for subjects to make 'right choices' and correct themselves.

Therapy Culture and Self-Esteem

Therapy culture refers to the medicalisation of previously non-medical conditions and subsequent shifts in how 'therapy' is ideated. Philosopher of psychology Somogy Varga, who also refers to therapy culture as "DSM culture" (referring to the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*), identifies the roots of therapy culture as "Freudian psychology and the nineteenth-century New Thought, which, among other things, aimed at cultivating 'healthy-mindedness'" (161–162). Under such a set of ideas, individual flaws and problems are seen as overtly medical (psychological) problems in need of treatment along the same lines as mental illness. Sociologist Frank Furedi likewise positions the growth of therapeutic discourse as a "[a] tendency to reinterpret not just troublesome but also normal experience through the medium of an emotional script" (2). Therapeutic discourse, argues Furedi, actively fosters a sense of emotional vulnerability and illness by medicalising what were previously thought of as everyday experiences, in turn "drawing up a radically new definition of what constitutes the human condition" (5). Furedi in particular targets claims of low self-esteem as "a cultural myth for our times . . . frequently depicted as a cause of virtually every form of social distress" (153–154).

The importance of self-esteem is underlined throughout makeover television, and the condition of low self-esteem is a common diagnosis for makeover television subjects (and subsequently an impetus for treatment via transformation). Makeover television theorist Brenda Weber links the diagnosis of low self-esteem with a broader diagnosis of the incomplete psychological and spiritual self: "makeover logic insists that feelings of sadness, depression, and even desolation contribute to alienation from an experience of consummated selfhood . . . altering feelings of despondency constitutes a form of self-making" (14). The role of the unhappy subject is thus a critical requirement of makeover television because it establishes a *necessity* for change as a disease poses a necessity for treatment.

A similar requirement in a television therapeutic context is the necessity of confession. Subjects who present with the diagnosed or self-diagnosed necessity for

change must further relate and share their experience. As Furedi observes: “one of the themes promoted through confessional television is that in order to heal, emotionally injured individuals need to let go of ‘private wound[s] by sharing them with others’” (40). Again, Furedi likens the confessional aspect of therapy culture to a surrender of personal responsibility: “[confession] relieves the burden of responsibility and it also offers a route to public acceptance and acclaim” (42). Foucault similarly recognises the apparent therapeutic value of confession as “a ritual in which the expression alone, independently of its external consequences, produces intrinsic modifications to the person who articulates it: it exonerates, redeems, and purifies him; it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises him salvation” (*The Will to Knowledge* 62). A recurring convention of makeover programs is that subjects must admit the flaws that have led them to this point in order for therapeutic treatment to work—the admission of one’s sickness or lack of self-control also a popular technique seen in depictions of self-help programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous. Both *Snog Marry Avoid?* and *The Biggest Loser Australia* prominently feature segments of confessional, though the differing structures of these programs affect how this confessional is constructed.

Kantian Deontology and Julia Driver’s “Evaluational Externalism”

The two ethical arguments I will engage with in this chapter are Kantian deontology and the “consequentialism of virtue,” also known as “objective consequentialism” or “evaluational externalism,” of philosopher and ethicist Julia Driver. Kantian deontology has been explained in further depth previously in the introduction and first chapter of this thesis, so I will exclude a detailed explanation of this argument here. My first chapter also indicated the shortcomings of utilitarian consequentialist frameworks of ethics in the ethical evaluation of reality television case studies. The sheer number of individuals potentially affected by reality television, the abstract nature of pleasures and pains created by reality television, and the unforeseeability of many potential outcomes of reality television also pose serious limitations on the applicability of utilitarian frameworks to this chapter’s case studies. While consequentialist criticisms of reality television are common, the numerous *potential* outcomes of reality television present difficulties for certain consequentialist frameworks of ethics.

Driver’s framework, in contrast, aims to account for what she calls “moral luck,” unpredictable results that may occur from an action and would subsequently constitute ethical failings in other consequentialist frameworks (77). Driver describes her framework as “the view that the moral quality of a person’s action or character is determined by

factors external to agency, such as actual (rather than expected) consequences," thus eliminating the need for consideration of hypotheticals (68). In accommodating for the character of an actor (a feature of virtue ethics frameworks), Driver's framework is permissive of acts that, while potentially producing negative outcomes, are made with good intent by actors possessing good virtues. *Good* virtues, in Driver's case, are those virtues which "promote human welfare" or "are conducive to human flourishing in the social context" (86). Driver's evaluational externalism is not maximal: one's actions are not required to produce the *best possible* outcome, merely some degree of good, even though certain actions and virtues may be comparable in producing more or less good than others (74). This, Driver contends, is to avoid excessive counterfactual objections that raise arbitrary and improbable exceptions to the account of evaluational externalism: "if good would be produced by the agent but for some fluke the agent still has moral virtue as long as the relevant trait produces good systematically in the actual world" (83).

Class, Gender, and Ethical Concerns in *Snog Marry Avoid?*

Snog Marry Avoid? is a British makeover program that originally aired for six seasons between 2008 and 2013 on the UK's BBC Three. The show's title and premise references a social game where participants choose to 'snog' (British slang for a kiss, and implicitly for a one-off sexual interaction), 'marry,' or 'avoid' a given person.

Subjects on the program are typically women—men have featured, albeit in a modified capacity—who self-identify with and embody the fashion of a particular lifestyle or subculture, including goths, punks, and English regional or class-based identities such as 'Geordies' or 'chavs.' Subjects are typically 'volunteered' for the show on behalf of another person, most often the subject's male partner or a family member, because their lifestyle and self-presentation is seen as unbecoming of the person's 'true' value. Photographs of the subject are shown to members of the public, who decide whether they would 'snog,' 'marry,' or 'avoid' the subject based on the subject's appearance. This early footage tends to overwhelmingly present 'avoid' answers. The game is overtly gendered; "snog, marry, avoid?" is used with female subjects and with male subjects that are outwardly identified as same-sex-attracted, but not with straight men (or men whose sexuality is not identified).

The core of the program is the transformation of garishly-presented subjects ("fakery-obsessed slap-addicts") into "natural beauties" through a 'make-under.' In practice, this involves the use of subtle cosmetics, clothing with a focus on sexual modesty, and a denunciation of the subject's previous fashion and lifestyle (the two generally being equated). These recommendations are made by POD, the 'Personal

Overhaul Device,' a computer-host character (unidentified in the credits but coded as feminine) that sarcastically mocks the subjects' previous self-presentation before 'computing' a new style prescription. Following a brief period of transformation in which the techniques and fashion choices are explained, the subject's new image is revealed to the audience and to the public as the game is repeated again (which this time overwhelmingly results in 'snog' and 'marry' answers). The program often includes a follow-up segment that revisits subjects from the episode or previous episodes after some months to see if they have maintained the made-under aesthetic or have 'reverted' back to their old ways—in which case, POD is generally supportive of the subject pursuing their own sense of beauty, though still dismissive of the subject's particular sense of beauty. The program thus considers self-presentation to be an ongoing project that requires vigilance and that can be failed through lack of discipline—*Snog Marry Avoid?* ostensibly functions as a technology of the self for both its subjects and audience. The premise of *Snog Marry Avoid?* has been used in international adaptations (though none as successful as the original program) in the United States (*Love, Lust or Run* (TLC 2015–)), the Netherlands, and Germany.

Snog Marry Avoid is an especially popular reference point in popular British journalism, even beyond its initial 2008–2013 series run. Much of this popular coverage is based in implicit ethical judgement. The program's home channel of BBC Three, a youth-oriented, government-funded channel whose staple programming was often cheaply-made reality programs, inevitably factors into these grievances. (BBC Three was discontinued from broadcast in 2016 and moved to an online platform.) In a 2014 online *Independent* article, Archie Bland denigrates *Snog Marry Avoid?* as a poor ambassador for the BBC Three brand, labelling the program "horrible . . . snobbish and schoolmarmish and judgemental." After describing an episode featuring Olivia Dean, a trans woman who is 'made under' to present as male (who is named Dean), Bland comments, "I wasn't much inclined to cheer for the channel after that." An article by Rachel Aroseti in the *Guardian* similarly dismisses the program, naming *Snog Marry Avoid?* and similar BBC Three programs as "damaging dross" and "cack-handed social experiments . . . ostensibly educational, these programs were actually more concerned with turning young people into unappealing caricatures in order to create a story arc." Aroseti's summary of *Snog Marry Avoid?* as a program in which women and girls [are] reduced to their constituent adornments and then told they look terrible by random blokes on the street" suggests that the gendered nature of the program also contributes to its disvalue. In a defence of *Snog Marry Avoid?* appearing in the *Telegraph*, Catherine Gee backhandedly supports the

program's project of transformation, labelling *Snog Marry Avoid?* "pure trash . . . featuring people who are featured are [sic] generally insecure and shallow types" but conceding "considering the audience the series draws, it seems a very useful program. As much as it may seem plainly obvious to some that a bikini top is not a suitable outfit for the pub, to others this is a genuine revelation." Bland's discomfort with *Snog Marry Avoid?*'s snobbery and "schoolmarmish" voice, as well as Aroseti's concerns over mischaracterisation (through turning subjects into "unappealing caricatures"), point towards anxiety over the means through which class structures are reinforced in the program. Gee, however, suggests that the program's pedagogical potential—implicitly class-based in language—validates *Snog Marry Avoid?*'s ethical value along consequentialist grounds.

In the course of its therapeutic project, *Snog Marry Avoid?* operates with particular discourses of normative identity of class, gender, and race. Most pertinent in this section is the intersection between class and gender, specifically the identities of working-class and middle-class femininity that are most prominent in the program—both of which are implicitly white in *Snog Marry Avoid?*—and transgressions outside of these identities. Most of the subjects featured on the program are coded as working-class through a variety of signifiers. Subjects' prominent regional accents, and outwardly-expressed regional identity, are frequently used as signifiers of working-class status, particularly in contrast to POD's Received Pronunciation accent. English regional stereotypes such as the 'Essex girl,' 'Geordie,' or 'chav' are likewise employed in association with primarily working-class demographics. The program's pedagogical function is twofold: firstly, it educates subjects and audiences on appropriate femininity, and, secondly, it reinforces middle-class notions of beauty onto working-class subjects as a means of fostering up-classing. Speaking of white working-class women specifically, Skeggs argues "the excessive immoral [working-class] woman is also a useful figure for cheap TV, providing the soft porn grotesque for titillation and disapprobation" (968). This expected titillation and disapprobation appear to factor into popular critiques of the program referenced above. Bland and Aroseti's articles identify *Snog Marry Avoid?*'s key moral flaws as the program's patronising attitude towards, largely, working-class (white) women. While Gee appears to also identify this aspect of the program, she suggests that the program is ultimately a force of good for subjects and viewers. The relationship between class, gender, and therapy is thus a vital consideration in the present analysis of *Snog Marry Avoid?*

The common 'condition' (in a pseudo-therapeutic sense) among *Snog Marry Avoid?*'s subjects is usually referred to by the program as 'fakery.' Symptoms of fakery include the use of excessive make-up and fake tan, and skimpy or sexual clothing. The

program's method, the self-described 'make-under,' linguistically positions this mission as a process of subtraction rather than addition (and so reducing a subject to their 'natural' state), though the made-under subject's final appearance is arguably just as constructed as their original look (making use of unobtrusive cosmetics and modest clothing). 'Fakery,' then, is not properly a problem of authenticity. Rather, *Snog Marry Avoid?*'s therapeutic project relates to pathologised transgressions of gender and class.

Feminist scholar Hannah McCann claims *Snog Marry Avoid?* targets "inappropriate' femininity" that "fall[s] outside of [the] normative standards of gender" (242). The program's standard of femininity, McCann argues, is also inherently classed: "one of the central aims of [*Snog Marry Avoid?*] is to achieve 'respectability' for the otherwise working-class contestants, via the regime of 'natural beauty'" (242). Many of the subjects featured on *Snog Marry Avoid?* present with what may be considered femininity in excess, which *Snog Marry Avoid?* likewise considers a transgression of acceptable gender roles. The eighth episode of the second season features Louise from Liverpool, a young woman who draws style inspiration from fashion doll Barbie: bleached-blonde hair, heavy use of solarium tanning, and uniformly hot-pink clothing. Louise's presentation, especially with respect to her style inspiration, is hyper-feminine, but this display of femininity in excess is deemed inappropriate by POD, who labels Louise "drag queen Barbie." *Snog Marry Avoid?*'s common use of the label 'drag queen' in its assessments, McCann observes, "implies that these women are engaging in a presentation of femininity that is so extreme and obvious, that it is mistaken for a *male* [interpretation of] femininity," an inappropriately unbounded display of gender (emphasis original) (246).

The consequences of fakery are barely elaborated upon by the program—fakery, in the program's limited sense of external presentation, is to be understood as an inherently negative phenomenon that has recently become pervasive in British society. *Snog Marry Avoid?* targets several consequences (in essence 'symptoms') of fakery. Most prominent among these is the inappropriate attraction of men. Vox pop clips shown in the 'snog, marry, avoid?' segments, as well as interview segments with subjects' male partners, establish that the subjects' self-presentation needs to be adjusted to attract a partner and signal more appropriate values. In the first episode of *Snog Marry Avoid?*'s second season, subject Mykela's skimpy fashion is directly connected to promiscuity and therefore positioned as a challenge to her boyfriend. Before Mykela's make-under, her (unnamed) boyfriend tells the camera about Mykela's current fashion sense: "she will be the girl that everyone has to have their eyes on, she'll be like, 'right, I'm gonna wear this, even if it's showing my naked body.'" Clips showing Mykela on a night out, dancing suggestively with

female and male friends, are shown beneath her boyfriend's comments, with Nelly Furtado's *Maneater* added as soundtrack. "I'm a wild child," Mykela tells the camera in the clip, before the scene cuts back to her boyfriend: "I just want her to realise that she's beautiful without all that [provocative] crap [on]." Mykela's boyfriend's assessment of the situation—that he simply wants his partner to appreciate her *own* beauty—is contradicted by the program's editing, which instead suggests Mykela's overtly-sexual appearance to be her principal flaw. Mykela's segment with POD reinforces the notion that the problem of her appearance is linked to an inappropriate sexuality: in the 'snog/marry/avoid' segment, one public respondent comments: "avoid . . . she looks like she's been around the block." "Having heard what people think of your look, do you now see that you *need* a make-under?" POD asks; "yeah, I do, I need it really badly," Mykela responds contritely. Following Mykela's immediate make-under, POD asks "what do you think your boyfriend will think of your new look? . . . what about the public?" POD reports that post-make-under, "ninety percent of the public want to give you a tongue sandwich"—presumably, this sort of sexual appeal is nonetheless within acceptable bounds. Upon their reunion, Mykela comments to her boyfriend that "I don't know how long it's going to stay for," to which he replies "make sure you keep this look, okay, you have to keep it feminine." This is a successful treatment in a *Snog Marry Avoid?* narrative.

Inappropriate femininity—particularly, what is depicted as a male expression of femininity—is similarly of concern in the case of Olivia Dean, who features in the seventh episode of the fifth season of *Snog Marry Avoid?* This case study is particularly concerning, and as seen above, has been specifically cited in public criticisms of the program. This example also quite effectively demonstrates the limits of *Snog Marry Avoid*'s therapeutic project and suggests its unsuitability as a self-declared form of therapeutic treatment (which is pertinent to a consequentialist evaluation of the program). Olivia Dean, 23, from rural Whitehaven in the north of England, is assigned male (as Dean) but expresses as feminine (as Olivia), and establishes at the top of the segment that she has done so since she was in her teens. (For clarity: the program uses both "Olivia" and "Olivia Dean" to refer to the person that is formerly known as Dean and is now referred to as Olivia. "Olivia" and "Olivia Dean" is referred to by feminine pronouns, while post-make-under "Dean" is referred to by masculine pronouns.) Following her introduction, *Snog Marry Avoid?* presents two problems with Olivia's fashion and, by extension, her identity. Firstly, Olivia admits that "everybody just thinks I'm quite strange. . . . I think I'm just not taken seriously," and suggests that her inability to find employment is a result of her presentation. Secondly, Olivia Dean's sister Sophie regards Olivia as her sister, but

complains about Olivia borrowing her makeup and clothes without returning it. Sophie begs: “Please, POD, bring my brother back, so I can get my clothes back.” (The unsubtle backing soundtrack in this segment is Lady Gaga’s “Born This Way.”) In a conversation pre-make-under, host Ellie Taylor refers to the identity of Olivia Dean in the third person—“tell me all about Olivia Dean, how did she *begin to exist*, then?” (emphasis mine). Taylor’s particular phrasing here implies a stable point of origin for the feminine identity of Olivia Dean. Olivia Dean, to reference feminist theorist Judith Butler, is equated with “the [feminine] stylisation of the body,” the outward (physical) signifiers that denote her as feminine which are presumed to have a definitive origin (179). This conversation segment also underlines that the motivations for Olivia Dean’s make-under are rooted in her inability to find employment:

> ELLIE TAYLOR: So, why exactly do you want POD’s help?
>
> OLIVIA DEAN: With the look I’m going for at the moment, no-one’s gonna want to employ me.
>
> ELLIE TAYLOR: So we’re going to take you back to Dean, as opposed to Olivia?
>
> OLIVIA DEAN: [*Nods*] Yeah.
>
> ELLIE TAYLOR: And how does that make you feel, being Dean?
>
> OLIVIA DEAN: Well, because I’ve been like this for so long, I’m a little bit scared. I’m in a stage in my life now where this is a bit too much, for even me, do y’know what I mean? And I don’t know what to do anymore.

Taylor then administers a “career path” test, having Olivia Dean choose between *a* or *b* choices such as “care work or cleaning?,” “caterer or crematorium worker?,” and “lawyer or lollypop lady?” *Snog Marry Avoid?* deploys the logic of choice (specifically, choice of employment) in an attempt to resolve Olivia’s problem, though it is not clear how to the audience (or to Olivia) how these choices are at all meaningful. POD concludes: “we need to restore your natural beauty and help you get that job with a Dashing Prince Charming Make-under.” Although Olivia Dean recognises that her problem is economic and cultural, rather than a pathological lack of self-esteem, *Snog Marry Avoid?* lacks an alternative mode of treatment, resorting to yet another make-under—in this case, the stripping away of Olivia Dean’s feminine expression to reveal the ostensibly stable (‘real’) masculine identity underneath. POD’s make-under transforms Olivia back to Dean via pants and a pink blazer (still subtly marking Dean as feminine) as well as the removal of makeup and hair extensions. POD informs Dean that while ninety-six percent of responses to Olivia were to ‘avoid,’ after transformation “the majority of the people that we spoke to wanted to snog or marry you,” to which Dean responds “it’s nice to hear lovely things for a change, it

is." Left unsaid is whether simply hearing "lovely things" is of meaningful benefit to Dean in light of his problems as Olivia. Dean is shown celebrating his transformation with his sister and resolving to maintain the look; while Dean's job prospects are still uncertain, the program presents the scene as triumphant.

A segment at the end of the episode revisits Olivia Dean to provide closure to this apparent question mark. Ellie Taylor sets up the segment by telling the camera: "earlier we met Olivia, who then became Dean, but *who will we meet now*?" (emphasis mine). When her interviewee is revealed to be Olivia, Taylor admits: "to be honest, there was no doubt in my mind it was ever going to be anyone but Olivia." Olivia explains "I'm more comfortable in my skin being Olivia," and relates that after catching up with friends from London, her new goal is to stay as Olivia and move away from Whitehaven: "thank you, POD, the experience overall was brilliant, but I'm just going to stick to who I am." Both Taylor's ("*who* will we meet now?") and Olivia's phrasing ("stick to who I am"), intentionally or not, highlight the performative nature of identity (particularly gender) in *Snog Marry Avoid?*, reinforcing the program's performative notion of gender as constituted by one's presentation—"gender reality is created through sustained social performances" (Butler 180). "I feel like we've gone a little bit deep," Ellie remarks, "should we go and get a cocktail and talk about boys?" While Olivia does not appear to be particularly upset as a result of her make-under back to Dean—at least as far as can be seen in the program itself—the segment presents several objections, chief among them the appropriateness of a light-hearted fashion-oriented makeover program attempting to tackle "a little bit deep" issues of gender identity and employment discrimination of trans individuals. While the program acknowledges that Olivia's presentation of gender restricts her employment, *Snog Marry Avoid?* does not go so far as to argue for social change or suggest meaningful solutions to the problem. Rather, in the program's neoliberal logic, the problem of unemployment is resolved by individual choices relating to hegemonic) gender expression, a course of treatment that (in Olivia's case at least) is inevitably unsuccessful. As the program ends, Olivia has wholly rejected the program's 'treatment' in favour of relocation—a decision which is itself characterised as an exercise of choice.

Mykela and Olivia's differ significantly from a segment in the first episode of the second season featuring Mark, a self-described "body modification enthusiast" who has extensive piercings. While much of Mark's conversation with POD resembles the standard format of the program—POD calls Mark a "cranially-probed prickly punk who needs my Close Encounter of the POD Kind Make-under"—Mark is not subjected to the same 'snog/marry/avoid' game as other subjects, and the makeover is explicitly done on his own

terms. Mark challenges POD to “convince me,” only accepting when POD emphasises the “once-in-a-lifetime, out-of-this-world” nature of the make-under, and stipulates to POD that “it’s only gonna be very brief,” to which POD relents “if you don’t like it, I shall return you to your cyborg self.” Mark’s appearance is never linked to his attractiveness (beyond the mild appeal to ‘natural beauty’) or suitability as a partner. The program emphasises that Mark may opt out of his make-under, and unlike with Mykela, there is no pressure for Mark to maintain his new fashion from POD or others. When Mark expresses dissatisfaction with his new appearance, POD immediately ‘transforms’ him back to his original self: “You clearly love this unnatural look . . . POD is happy that you are happy.” Mark’s fakery is apparently neither damaging nor serious, and *Snog Marry Avoid?* seems to recognise that Mark’s ‘fakery’ is in fact an authentic outlet of self-expression. Mark’s ‘made-under’ look—including a two-piece suit, tie, and trilby—also exposes a playful approach to class. “You don’t have a copy of the *Financial Times* . . . and a briefcase or something?” Mark asks. “You mean like a banker?” POD asks in response. “You’re one letter out, but yeah,” replies Mark. Mark and POD mutually register the class shift that has taken place through Mark’s transformation, as Mark requests props to complete his new middle-class persona while signalling his disdain for the persona itself. Mark allows himself to play the role of subject transformed from working-class to middle-class through external changes, not only for his own amusement, but to indulge the program’s therapeutic premise. In doing so, Mark highlights the middle-class nature of *Snog Marry Avoid?*’s therapeutic project. Sociology professor Laura Grindstaff observes (originally in reference to US reality programming):

> The historic rise of therapeutic culture is generally taken to be a white, middle-class phenomenon. . . . the working classes are assumed to lack the psychological depth necessary for self-governance . . . it seems plausible that at least some participants who are not white and/or middle class are nevertheless quite capable of delivering a middle-class performance. (203)

While Mark demonstrates in his transformation that he *is* indeed capable of performing middle-classness, but explicitly rejects a continued performance of middle-class respectability. The performance, while brief, is also playful, as neither Mark nor POD appear to treat the transformation with much weight. The use of insults and teasing common in *Snog Marry Avoid?* loses its critical edge in Mark’s segment, as the coercive power of the mockery and therapeutic language is shown to be easily dismissed. Mark’s make-under stands out as a case study in *Snog Marry Avoid?* distinct from Mykela and Olivia Dean’s segments due to the playful nature of the transformation. This playfulness may potentially act as an ameliorating factor in ethical appraisals of the program.

Public discourse surrounding *Snog Marry Avoid?* establishes the program's worth or lack thereof along three major lines: firstly, that the program's therapeutic project is right or wrong conceptually, and secondly on the program's outcomes for subjects, audiences, and society at large. A third point of debate is whether those involved in the creation of the program (and thus implicitly in the 'character' of the program as an object) are acting toward their subjects out of good character or intentions (i.e., that they genuinely wish to help their subjects, or are merely acting 'snobbishly'). This first line of criticism strongly aligns with an evaluation of the program through a Kantian deontological framework, which indeed finds the program to be unacceptable. The second and third lines of criticism here can both be evaluated through Driver's evaluational externalist arguments. This framework considers an action's ethical worth based on consequences continuing on from an actor's character. Along these lines, an evaluational externalist ethicist would consider the program at ethical fault to a minor degree, on the grounds that the program's producers cannot be said to act out of good character—while the outcomes of actions in mass-media may be difficult to establish clearly, it can be argued that the virtues or vices embodied by ethical actors involved in the production of the program are not conducive to actually positive outcomes.

A Kantian deontological perspective finds moral flaws present in *Snog Marry Avoid?* that reflect similar concerns in public commentary and in examples from the program—namely, that the program's premise is inherently disrespectful of its subjects' intrinsic value. The question of how a Kantian may characterise the use of humiliation and therapy in *Snog Marry Avoid*, then, depends on the potential moral value of the program's therapeutic mechanism—that is, whether the program's producers are acting out of a real duty towards their subjects—countered by its use of humiliation toward (and disrespect of) its subjects. This disrespect may be considered in the individual humiliation of subjects, or it may be considered more broadly through the program's apparent disdain towards working class presentation or 'inappropriate' displays of femininity. The counterpoint to these complaints is the program's ostensibly therapeutic nature; the premise of *Snog Marry Avoid?* is that fakery is necessarily a negative tendency, and only through stripping away individuals to their 'true selves' can they embody 'natural beauty.' The *Snog Marry Avoid?* project could be seen as cultivating individuals' value through its transformations, though this cultivation of individual value does not negate other ethical failings present in the program.

An important characteristic of Kantian deontology to consider in this evaluation is Kant's absolute approach toward ethical judgements. Actions are ultimately either moral or

immoral without the potential for mixed or ambiguous valence. Kant explicitly positions the duty of virtue as a "*negative* duty;" that is, individuals are not obliged to "*revere* others," merely obliged to *not* act against their value (*Metaphysics of Morals* 213). It is therefore apparent that Kantian deontology would ascribe negative moral value to *Snog Marry Avoid?* on the basis that the program (and by extension, those who contribute to the creation and distribution of the program) does not properly respect the intrinsic value of its subjects. The program arguably goes against Kant's notion of a duty of virtue against ridicule, "the propensity to expose others to laughter, to make their faults the immediate object of one's amusement" (*Metaphysics of Morals* 212). A potential caveat to this duty is Kant's notion of "banter . . . in which one makes fun of [a friend's] peculiarities that only seem to be faults but are really marks of their pluck in sometimes departing from the rule of fashion (for this is not derision)" (212–213). This is arguably taking place in some segments of *Snog Marry Avoid*, most notably in the case of Mark the body-modification enthusiast. While POD's commentary positions Mark as not fully human (a "horny cyborg" whose "head has been penetrated by alien machines"), there does not seem to be genuine malice in the dialogue—POD makes it clear that Mark's self-image is his own prerogative ("POD is happy that you are happy"). The same, however, cannot be said of all of *Snog Marry Avoid?*'s subjects. Many segments involving female subjects routinely compare young women to drag queens or strippers; while these humiliations might arguably be in the service of play, they differ quite significantly in character. The 'snog, marry, avoid?' game in particular appears designed to convince (or, indeed, coerce) subjects into admitting they are of low value (where 'value' is associated with modest attractiveness and marriageability) in order to illustrate the need for a transformation. Of note is that the *consequence* of this ridicule—the make-under and, in theory, subjects' renewed self-confidence or social standing—does not factor into this negative valence. The act fundamentally transgresses the producers' duty of virtue toward others, and positive outcomes do not negate the previous action against duty.

A Kantian deontological perspective may also criticise *Snog Marry Avoid?* as acting in disregard to the duty of virtue against *defamation*, "the immediate inclination, *with no particular aim in view*, to bring into the open something prejudicial with respect for others" (emphasis mine) (*Metaphysics of Morals* 212). Again, regardless of the producers' intent, they have acted in a manner that may invite derision of their subjects in the broader community (though this judgement is not predicated on any actual outcome, merely the act's potential for one), and thus weakened "the respect owed to humanity as such" (Kant

Metaphysics of Morals 212). Kantian deontology particularly objects to the public broadcast of negative judgements against others:

> It is, therefore, a duty of virtue not to take malicious pleasure in exposing the faults of others so that one will be thought as good as, or at least not worse than, others, but rather to throw the veil of benevolence over their faults, not merely by softening our judgements but also by keeping these judgements to ourselves. (Kant *Metaphysics of Morals* 212)

The very premise of *Snog Marry Avoid?*—to publically broadcast judgements of others—is thus in opposition to Kantian duty of virtue.

Evaluating *Snog Marry Avoid?* from the position of Driver's evaluational externalism requires consideration of two conditions: firstly, whether the producers and others involved in the creation and dissemination of the program have produced good outcomes as a result of their actions, and secondly, whether the producers and others embody virtues that would systematically create good. With reference to the criticisms against the program cited at the outset of this section, this characterisation depends on the actual effects of the program's therapeutic techniques, as well as the virtues or vices that inform the program's therapeutic project. Driver's framework here would seem to be fairly permissive towards the program, to the extent that much of *Snog Marry Avoid?* ultimately seems acceptable based on its outcomes. Part of this is the fairly trivial nature of *Snog Marry Avoid?*'s transformations—while individuals are subject to make-unders, there is little explicit pressure from the program to maintain one's made-under self. The cases of Mark and Olivia Dean, who quickly revert back to their 'old selves,' demonstrate the relatively temporary nature of make-unders *Snog Marry Avoid?* In both of these cases, the program largely acknowledges the frivolity of the make-under project and instead suggests its ultimate aim is to ensure participants are comfortable in their own skin ("POD is happy if you are happy"). Several participants, such as Louise and Mykela, *do* appear to be pleased with POD's make-under, and the experience is presumably an overall positive for them. It may be argued, of course, that these examples do not represent the bulk of *Snog Marry Avoid?* transformations, and that some subjects are negatively affected by the experience. This counterargument is admittedly difficult to substantiate one way or another; the vast majority of make-unders shown on the program end amicably, though certainly any hostile reactions from subjects would likely be excluded from broadcast. The program's mode of treatment—the use of shaming to instigate 'proper' middle-class femininity—may be of questionable merit, and the consequences of the program's project on wider society are complex.

It is not readily apparent to what extent *Snog Marry Avoid?* is regarded an authoritative source by its viewers. For lack of consensus in how the program is received, these differing interpretations ought to be weighted. The therapeutic project *Snog Marry Avoid?* is based in the enforcement of class and gender-based standards; specifically, presentations of class and gender that fall outside of the accepted norms of the program are explicitly marked as defective. The program's notion of 'natural beauty' is in reality a normative enforcement of class signifiers—though the program's playfulness casts doubt on whether these attitudes are taken sincerely. The program's reception in tabloid publications, as referenced earlier in this chapter, suggests that the ideology of the program's transformative project is received at face value—at least when this project is applied to figures of public interest.

What is less clear is to what extent the program itself normalises harmful attitudes regarding gender and class. This is in itself a difficult premise to evaluate without scholarship directly concerned with the program's reception. It is reasonable to state, however, that the program *invites* judgements towards at least some of its subjects. As Carroll observes, many narratives require "the activation of [their audience's] . . . moral judgements" ("Moderate Moralism" 228). *Snog Marry Avoid?* clearly prompts its audience to respond to the program's subjects with moral judgements. Mykela's overt sexuality is depicted as distasteful and in need of correction, while Mark is depicted as bizarre though harmless. These invited judgements are an integral part of the program. It is reasonable that anticipated responses to the program include sceptical or conflicted responses, as well as the cued response of moral judgement—though these judgements are made in spite of, rather than because of, the program's own ideological message. It seems plausible to advance, at least, that the program has to a minor extent *perpetuated* objectionable attitudes regarding femininity, class, and standards of beauty, if only through transmitting content embodying these attitudes to the world.

The question of whether *Snog Marry Avoid*'s production staff embody virtue that systematically creates good outcomes is likewise difficult to determine. The program's ostensible message of self-love—that beauty comes from being one's 'true self,' even if this conflicts with the program's preferred 'natural beauty'—reflect a virtue of tolerance, a willingness to accept others as they are. This sort of tolerance undoubtedly encourages "human flourishing in the social context" by allowing individuals to live in peace with each other (Driver 86). The program's constant refrain of uncovering a subject's 'natural beauty' is challenged by the program's own willingness to accept voluntary fakery over involuntary naturalness, which suggests that the ultimate end of the program is in the recognition and

acceptance of unfamiliar worldviews. In *Snog Marry Avoid*, however, the embodiment of the virtue of tolerance and the actual nature of the program's actions are almost polar opposites. The case of Olivia Dean especially demonstrates this problem. Although Olivia is ultimately an object of sympathy and understanding for the program (her decision to present as feminine, 'being herself,' is depicted as a positive development on the program), this sympathy is only cued following a segment which questions and breaks down her feminine identity. This instance does not appear to be a case of bad moral luck or accident—it is part of the regular procedure of the program. It is doubtful that the program's producers are here adopting the virtues of tolerance and acceptance in good faith. In the follow-up interview between Ellie Taylor and Olivia, furthermore, Olivia discloses that catching up with friends from London, rather than the efforts of the program, prompted her renewed resolve to present as feminine. Olivia's decision and outcome seems undoubtedly good, at least as far as Olivia's own internal satisfaction goes, but this outcome is not a direct consequence of the producers' actions.

As referenced above, the program's highly-edited nature means any judgement is formed from an incomplete account—while all of the segments *on the program* end amicably, it is plausible that other make-unders have been left out, that other subjects may have been left unhappy or offended by the experience, or have not found it satisfying. While the exact nature of these cases is hypothetical—it is reasonable to at least assume that certain segments have been filmed but not aired—they do not significantly affect the nature of a evaluational externalist analysis of the program, which is concerned with *actual* outcomes.

***The Biggest Loser Australia*, Humiliation, and Neoliberal Therapy**

Originally an American format, makeover gameshow program *The Biggest Loser* has been adapted for a large number of international markets, including Australia. The Australian version of the program has used multiple season titles within the *Biggest Loser* branding; the case study for this chapter is the program's 2015 season, the second to feature family groups, which was named *TBL Families 2*. For clarity, the Australian version of the program is referred to simply as *The Biggest Loser Australia*.

The premise of the program is the same as the American franchise: a number of overweight individuals undertake an intense diet and exercise regimen to competitively lose weight. Each episode culminates in a "weigh-in," where the competitors' weights and weight loss progress is publically tracked. At each weigh-in, the contestant who has lost the smallest proportion of their body weight is eliminated, until one contestant (the 'biggest

loser') is declared the winner. In accordance with the reality gameshow format, individual episodes feature immunity or reward challenges that protect a contestant from elimination or present them with some sort of advantage, and challenges may require contestants to work in teams. *The Bigger Loser Australia* references the growing prevalence of obesity in the country and suggests personal mechanisms to manage weight (including diet and exercise) as well as a need for broader institutional change (such as the promotion of weight management programs).

The Biggest Loser Australia and similar health-based makeover programs have been criticised in popular culture on a variety of grounds. Two of the most prominent complaints against the program are that the program's project of weight loss is ineffective or even physically harmful to contestants—and by extension, the program is a poor model for audiences to emulate—and that the program invites ridicule toward its obese contestants. In *Daily Life*, a child publication of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, medical ethicist Stacy Carter observes that contestants "are rewarded not for improving their health, but for decreasing their weight. Before weigh-ins they reportedly starve themselves, go without fluids and take long saunas to temporarily shed kilos." The framework of the program, Carter argues, is not conducive to sustainable weight loss: "Most contestants regain their weight after the show because they lost it too quickly, and because the show's environment is so unlike normal life changes can't be sustained." Carter concludes that "for the show to be morally defensible, it needs to set reasonable goals, encourage small and sustainable lifestyle changes . . . and stop body shaming. It would, in fact, need to be an entirely different show." An article by Rebecca Sullivan for *news.com.au* features quotations from Emma Chalmers, a former trainer on the program, who called the program a "body-shaming platform," and criticised the program's format-based necessity of featuring trainers in a "'bully' role." In *The Conversation*, Michelle Smith objects to the program's depiction of obese people as grotesque: "*The Biggest Loser* displays its contestants' fat bodies in the manner of a freak show to encourage the viewer's repulsion. . . . The presentation of fat bodies as disgusting contributes to the sense that fat people are unworthy people." Smith further criticises the program's unrealistic physical fitness challenges as serving an ulterior motive: "the sheer difficulty of [the program's physical challenges], set despite the potential health problems of the contestants that the programme talks up, provides the opportunity for trainers to act as the tough, authority figures"

Popular criticisms of *The Biggest Loser Australia* thus identify ethical faults in the program, often with implicit rationales for why these aspects of the program are flawed—

generally on consequentialist grounds of actual or expected outcomes. Implicit in the program's premise is that obesity is not only a problem of physical health, but a source of shame and embarrassment. Contestants appearing on the program are cast as victims who, up until this point, have not possessed the self-control and discipline to lose weight. While the program depicts weight loss as having instrumental value, it also frequently depicts its contestants (who seek to lose weight) as objects of ridicule. Particularly in the season's early episodes, exhausting physical challenges and psychological 'temptation' challenges invite the audience to find pleasure in the humiliation of obese people. Furthermore, the program is criticised for an unhealthy and unrealistic presentation of weight-loss through extreme dieting and excessive exercise. The use of the competitive element, which positions contestants to compete against each other and lose enormous amounts of weight in an incredibly limited window of time, is perceived as favouring quick results over sustainable health practices.

The opening moments of the first episode of *TBL Families 2* (the tenth season of *The Biggest Loser Australia*) establish the program through a series of contrasts: successes and challenges, the past and the future, the distant and the local, and the individual and the group. These contrasts position the program as a mediator between extremes. A montage of previous contestants celebrating their success (given historicity via the use of black-and-white and desaturated colour) as well as a voiceover informing the audience that the program has "helped Aussies lose more than fifty thousand kilos" aims to establish the program's value as a means of treatment. The voiceover continues: "but, as the tenth season of *The Biggest Loser* begins . . ." Footage from a news program is shown, with Sandra Sully reporting that "Australia's *addiction* to junk is now *incurable*" (emphases mine). The voiceover continues again over footage of season ten's contestants eating fast food: ". . . the nation remains in the grip of an obesity *epidemic*" (emphasis mine). Another clip of a news program is shown: newsreader Hugh Riminton reports "it has now become a national disgrace—Australia is officially one of the fattest nations on Earth."

This brief sequence quickly establishes two themes that are recurring in *The Biggest Loser Australia*: that obesity is a dysfunction of epidemic proportions, and that the prevalence of obesity is a particular threat to the Australian national character. Much of the language is pathological—obesity is characterised as a possibly-*incurable addiction* of *epidemic* proportions. The problem of obesity is also a problem of national and international standing—obesity is Australia's "national disgrace," and Australia's status as "one of the fattest nations on Earth" is implied to be an international embarrassment. (The World Health Organisation reports Australia's 2014 adult obesity rate to be around 27.6%,

placing it as the seventeenth-highest) The wide-reaching problem of obesity is nonetheless made manageable through focus on the local; the voiceover establishes "for series ten, we're taking it back to what really matters . . . family . . . On a journey to save each other… and themselves [sic]." In doing so, *The Biggest Loser Australia* focalises the issue of obesity through the management of individuals (operating within a small family unit). As Furedi argues: "the wider problems bound up with uncertainty are reinterpreted and experienced as risks to the emotional health of the individual" (132). The mechanisms of humiliation, shame, and therapy in *The Biggest Loser Australia* thus work to individualise the problem of obesity, to characterise obesity as a failure of self-governance, and to propose management strategies to control obesity through the labour of self-governance.

The first episode of *TBL Families 2* introduces the contestants to the audience, establishes the contestants' problems and motivations, and emphasises the challenge of obesity. There are neiter weight-loss tasks in this first episode nor a regular weigh-in. Much of the narrative of the episode revolves around the four trainers (Shannon Ponton, Michelle Bridges, Tiffiny Hall, and "the Commando" Steve Willis) embedding with their respective families for a week, including eating the same regular meals as their hosts. With each of these meals, a graphic lists details of the meal such as calorie count and teaspoons of fat. The meal sessions demonstrate the family dynamic between the contestants, but these segments also serve as a site of excess, confession, and shame. The trainers ask questions of their families to diagnose the causes of their obesity, and how their lives would continue were it not for the intervention of *The Biggest Loser Australia*. In doing so, these segments also serve as a confession of a failure of self-governance on the part of the contestants. Many of the contestants recognise their behaviour is unhealthy, but express a sense of helplessness or lack of agency over their own lives and health. While having lunch with the Auvale family, 'Commando' asks: "how are you all feeling right now, like good? Food-wise? Like, what's the relevance of just having so much food?" to which siblings Moses and Johnee attribute their background of growing up in poverty. Johnee astutely recognises the socio-economic dimensions of obesity—including ethnicity as a predictor of obesity in Australia (Johnee and Moses are of Samoan background)—while admitting he is unable to break the cycle:

> I think [it happens] when you come from a place that's broken and pretty dirt-poor… we had to live with four other families in a one-bedroom unit, y'know. When you have something, you want more of it. And that's what's happened in our life. *But now we don't know how to stop*. (emphasis mine)

When Commando asks where they would be if not for *The Biggest Loser Australia*, Johnee replies: “we’d continue on until one of us died. Without *Biggest Loser*, I see my life spiralling out of control even more, and that scares me. So yeah, I see *Biggest Loser* as my last chance, my final hope.” Johnee’s fatalistic appraisal of the situation embodies what Furedi sees as the ‘helpless self’ in modern society: “therapeutic culture transforms the trauma and profound sense of helplessness . . . into an objective mental health condition” (127). Likewise, *The Biggest Loser Australia* positions obesity as a *symptom* rather than the condition itself. While individual contestants vary, a consistent idea furthered by the program is that obesity reflects a failure of self-management and self-esteem: the Auvale family’s obesity comes from “[not] know[ing] how to stop.” Johnee’s confession of his helplessness acts as the first step to recovery—the public disclosure of his problem enables him to begin improving himself (Foucault *The Will to Knowledge* 62).

Contestants in at least two of the families—Rob Jofre as well as Jodie Pestell—would like to marry their respective partners, but are self-conscious over their weight. Jodie tells trainer Shannan Ponton: “when I look in the mirror, I see something that I don’t like. I don’t think I would want to marry someone looking like this. . . . Looking in this mirror right now, I’m embarrassed. I didn’t realise that I got this big.” Beneath this voiceover, a shot of Jodie wearing a wedding dress in front of a mirror is shown, followed by the same shot but with Jodie stripped down to her underwear. Jodie bursts into tears. As with the Auvales, Jodie’s weight is shown to be a failure of vigilance and self-monitoring, ‘not realising’ what was happening to her. Jodie’s failure of self-monitoring is realised literally via two shots of her standing in front of a mirror—in view of not only the camera’s gaze, but also her own. A segment later in the first episode featuring Mel Pestell and Shannan further connects the problem of obesity to psychological pathology. Mel and Shannan have a snack—a full-sized Bavarian cheesecake with ice cream, each—and Shannan asks Mel how often she would have this snack:

SHANNAN: Mel, when do you eat like this?

MEL: Usually if I’m sad, stressed, feeling down.

SHANNAN: Why do you feel down, mate? What makes you feel emotional, come home and eat like this?

MEL: Just unhappy with myself. I don’t feel confident, I don’t feel healthy.

A voiceover from Mel later elaborates that she is unhappy that she does not have a romantic partner. In a talking-head interview immediately after, Shannan spots the cycle: “she’s lonely because she eats like this, and she eats like this because she’s lonely.” After diagnosing Mel, Shannan outlines the process of self-monitoring and self-governance that

is to come: “from now on, emotional eating doesn’t exist anymore, emotional training exists.”

Communications scholars Katherine Sender and Margaret Sullivan, in a viewership study comprised of interviews with viewers of *The Biggest Loser Australia*, assert that while audiences the program often react negatively to the program’s humiliation of contestants and the use of dramatic weight-loss regimens, they largely do not dispute the program’s thesis that obesity is a failure of inner self:

> Yet audiences concur with the underlying premise of both [*What Not to Wear* and *The Biggest Loser*]: an obese body is evidence of an inner malaise. In particular, epidemics of the will and failures of self-esteem are seen as both the cause and the outcome of the problems that makeover shows much address. (573)

The admissions made by the contestants in this first episode, the language of which emphasises a sense of passivity and lack of control, reflect a form of therapeutic claims-making recognised by Furedi. The language of passivity (obesity as something that happens when one is not paying attention) in turn dislocates responsibility from the individual: “people who suffer from a physical or psychological condition are represented as victims of their condition. People do not so much have heart attacks; they are often portrayed as victims of heart attack” (Furedi 178). In the same way, the contestants on *The Biggest Loser Australia* are portrayed as unknowing ‘victims’ of obesity who have previously lacked the self-determination to escape the cycle of weight gain. From this position of vulnerability, the program proposes therapeutic mechanisms to help contestants reclaim self-control (and lose weight). These mechanisms largely rely on a neoliberal logic of individualist self-governance based on the advice of designated experts. Within the framework of reality television, however, this mode of self-governance fails to adequately address the needs of *The Biggest Loser Australia*’s subjects—to such a degree that can constitute an ethical failing.

The Biggest Loser Australia’s method of treating obesity relies on a neoliberal mode of teaching self-management. *The Biggest Loser Australia* eschews large-scale responses to obesity, instead decentralising the project of self-governance and good citizenship through individual interactions between citizens and ‘experts’ (the trainers). This relationship is pedagogical in nature, with trainers acting as guides to shape the behaviour of contestants (and by extension audiences) into responsible, self-managing citizens. One aspect of this shaping of behaviour involves the merit of labour, both physical and emotional. This aligns with neoliberal notions of work as having value “as an activity

through which we produce, disover, and experience our selves" (Rose *Governing the Soul* 104).

Humiliation of *The Biggest Loser Australia*'s contestants is one aspect of the program's notion emotional labour as a therapeutic tool. In the second episode of *TBL Families 2*, the Pestells are shown attending their preliminary 'weigh-in,' where their starting weights may be measured to be tracked for the length of the program. This event is highly public—held at the Mereweather Surf Club outside of Newcastle, contestants' family and friends as well as members of the general public are in attendance to witness the weigh-in. In a voiceover, Jodie says: "I felt everybody looking at me, I felt everybody staring at me. I didn't really want to go out there." Shannan Ponton announces the family's obesity problem before Ali steps upon the scale. Numbers on a digital display tick back and forth before finally settling on a value. "My name is Ali, and I weigh 130.2 kilos," Ali confesses through tears. "I knew I was big, I just didn't think I was that big," Ali continues, as the program cuts to shots of audience members nodding, "I'm gonna do this. I'm gonna do it for myself and my family, and especially for [daughter] Tilly." Previously in the episode, Ali has mentioned that she does not like the thought of her daughter seeing her stripped-down—an anxiety that eventually plays out in the public space. The segment continues, as each member of the Pestell family (and, in other locales, the other families) is shown being weighed and announcing their weight to the audience.

The segment is undoubtedly aimed to humiliate and shame. Voiceovers indicate that many of the contestants feel shamed by the public nature of the weigh-in; the contestants demonstrate clear body language of shame (crying, looking down and avoiding eye contact). This public shaming of the contestants also performs a confessional function. Reality television theorist Mimi White observes: "confession is immediately understood as a therapeutic process, promoting expiation, a release of tension, *or the narrative constructions of a psychoanalytic cure*" (emphasis mine) (8). *The Biggest Loser Australia*'s "psychoanalytic cure" for obesity is highly-public emotional and physical labour, of which public scrutiny and humiliation is part. The frame of reality television and the notion of one's labour being recorded and broadcast plays an important role. Surveillance theorist Mark Andrejevic labels the labour of reality television "the work of being watched," proposing that reality television operates under the assumption that there is "therapeutic potential of surveillance" in "a process of self-expression, self-realization, and self-validation" (108). The work of being watched forms one part of *The Biggest Loser*'s therapeutic notion of work.

Labour is quantified and promoted in the program through the game structure; each week, the contestant who has lost the lowest proportion of their body weight (and therefore, in the program's narrative, has done the least successful work) is eliminated, while the overall winner of the program receives a $100 000 prize. This gameshow structure transforms the project of self-governance and self-transformation into a competition of labour and creates a self-imposed pressure to perform. The program's notion of weight loss as competition, as well as its use of public displays of shaming, factors into ethical complaints against *The Biggest Loser Australia*.

As discussed earlier in this section, popular criticisms of *The Biggest Loser Australia* by Carter, Smith, and Sullivan argue that the program's premise is inappropriate in itself—that the program's humiliation of contestants is inherently wrong regardless of good outcomes or intentions. The key question in a Kantian deontological evaluation of *The Biggest Loser Australia* is whether the program's use of humiliation and therapeutic discourse diminish the inherent value and dignity of the contestants. If so, the program and its producers can be thought of acting against their duty towards the contestants to treat them as subjects of intrinsic value.

I find that *The Biggest Loser Australia* cannot be regarded as respecting its subject's intrinsic value. Therefore, the program's use of humiliation and therapeutic discourse is unacceptable within a Kantian framework of ethics. Kantian objections to *The Biggest Loser Australia* are similar to those toward *Snog Marry Avoid*, particularly with regards to the Kantian duties against ridicule and defamation. The broadcast of unflattering images of the contestants' physiques and home lives, even if intended to encourage compassion for *The Biggest Loser Australia*'s contestants, nonetheless expose these subjects to mockery in violation of Kant's duty of respect for others (*Metaphysics of Morals* 212). Although this humiliation does not persist throughout the entirety of the program—at other times, the program's subjects are depicted in an inspirational fashion—this initial humiliation constitutes an ethical flaw in itself. The contestants on *The Biggest Loser Australia* are likened to addicts, victims, and people unable to control their own lives. While this serves a purpose within the therapeutic narrative of the program, it nonetheless is done in a way that transgresses the Kantian duties against ridicule and defamation. The ultimate consequence of this ridicule—arguably positive—is of no importance in the Kantian framework; the act is morally wrong in itself.

A potential objection to this analysis might argue that *The Biggest Loser Australia* fulfils the "duty of beneficence" in "promot[ing] . . . the happiness of others in need" (Kant *Metaphysics of Morals* 202). An attitude along these lines is certainly expressed by the

program's promotional materials and by the program's trainers: in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Ellen Laughton quotes trainer Tiffiny Hall in describing the program as "creat[ing] a healthy culture. You can see the changes pass on through the generations and infiltrate into the community." While consequences do not factor into Kantian analyses, it might be argued that the program's producers and trainers are nonetheless acting out of a genuine desire to help others. Upon closer inspection, however, this argument does not hold up, because the duty of beneficence requires assisting others because doing so would be a *good in itself*. Kant further stipulates that "someone who is *rich* . . . should hardly even regard beneficence as a meritorious duty on his own part," because "the satisfaction he derives from his beneficence, which costs him no sacrifice, is a way of reveling [sic] in moral feelings" (emphasis original) (202).

When applied to *The Biggest Loser Australia*, a perspective from Driver's evaluational externalism framework would consider the outcomes of the program's actions (taken in this case to mean its therapeutic process) as ethical failings. The most obvious and immediate outcome—that unhealthily-obese contestants lose weight—seems undeniably positive, though the means through which the program reaches that point may be objectionable. A more serious concern, however, is in the program's promotion of unrealistic and potentially unhealthy weight loss regimes. In a study of responses to *The Biggest Loser Australia* that involved 152 Australian viewers of the program, media theorist Kate Holland et al. report that "for the majority of participants the unrealistic nature of the program was likely to constrain its potential to motivate or encourage people to live a healthy lifestyle" (13). This suggests that although the program's subjects may benefit (they lose weight), the program's presentation of weight loss may actually have a limiting effect on audiences applying the program's message. Holland et al. cite subjects who reported frustration that they could not lose weight at the same rate as contestants on the program (due to the program's full-time weight loss regimen), or because the program's highly-constructed nature (such as the provision of unlimited fresh and healthy foods) made it unsuitable as a model (13). This outcome seems a very real concern for a program ostensibly premised on promoting weight loss strategies, and potentially harms the program's overall moral value within an evaluational externalism framework. A perceived lack of realism (by viewers) appears to inhibit any positive effect the program may have on viewers outside of its value as entertainment (which is in itself an issue of debate).

Sender and Sullivan suggest that the program's representational strategies may succeed at a metaphorical, rather than literal level; while audiences recognise the

program's unrealistic depiction of weight loss, they nonetheless find inspirational value in "*The Biggest Loser*'s emphasis on weight loss through working hard" (581). They report that respondents to the American edition of *The Biggest Loser* found the program's focus on hard work (rather than surgery) as a solution to obesity was a laudable position, even though the techniques depicted on the program may be impractical for average viewers (580). The practical, actual outcomes of the program are thus disputed. A possible answer is that although audiences internalise the program's message of individual effort as key to weight loss, this message does not translate into real action on the part of audiences. The value of this outcome then seems difficult to quantify—if audiences believe that weight loss is possible through individual work, but do not undertake this work themselves, is this a positive outcome? Furthermore, if audiences perceive a weight-loss message as inauthentic and subsequently reject it, but still find entertainment value in the program, is this entertainment a positive outcome in itself? At a surface level, entertainment value may qualify as a positive outcome for *The Biggest Loser Australia*, though the ethical worth of entertainment value does not itself seem particularly meritous.

A secondary consideration in an evaluational externalist analysis of *The Biggest Loser Australia* is whether the actors have acted with virtue in a manner that would systematically produce good outcomes. Two main sets of actors bear examination: *The Biggest Loser*'s producers and its trainers. The program's status as a television product—including the relative lack of concrete advice outside of separate merchandise—suggests that the producers of the program act out of self-interest rather than any meaningful desire to encourage weight loss. It may be said that there is some degree of beneficence from the program's producers; the program *is* about weight loss, and (at least for the program's contestants) enables weight loss, and the program's capacity to inspire may indicate a similar willingness to inspire change on the part of the producers. It is difficult, however, to see this tendency as borne out of a proper virtue of beneficence. I would offer that a truly beneficent producer would ensure the program included useful advice for encouraging weight loss and healthy living, or at least avoided the use of humiliating aspects in the first place. It is unlikely, furthermore, that self-interest qualifies as a virtue to "promote human flourishing . . . by alleviating interaction problems among people" (Driver 74)—rather, it could easily be considered the opposite, in that actions done out of self-interest often create conflict.

It might be considered that *The Biggest Loser Australia*'s trainers act according to positive virtues, in which case their participation in the program may be ethically meritous within an evaluational externalist framework. If one assumes Tiffiny Hall (for example)

honestly believes her participation in the program generates positive outcomes for society, her participation in the program might therefore be considered as motivated (in part) by beneficience, which is undoubtedly a virtue. While *The Biggest Loser Australia* may produce negative outcomes, it might be suggested, the programs' trainers are still acting in an ethically good manner—in other words, the negative outcomes associated with *The Biggest Loser Australia* happen in spite of the trainers' actions. This argument, I believe, is not without shortcomings. Namely, this line of thought assumes that *The Biggest Loser Australia*'s negative outcomes are exceptional; as has been established earlier in this section, however, the program's negative outcomes emerge from its premise (significant weight loss over a rapid period of time, achieved through performative labour). It seems unlikely that, despite the virtuous motivations of specific trainers, their role in producing ethically-flawed outcomes is unforeseeable or the result of bad moral luck—that *but for* the individual details of a specific season, their actions would result in good outcomes within the reality television premise of *The Biggest Loser Australia*. Regardless of virtues that Tiffiny Hall may possess, the outcomes of her actions (which are generally foreseeable) nonetheless constitute ethical failings.

Conclusion: Humiliation and Therapy in Makeover Television

Humiliation and shame underlie makeover television's transformative project through forcing therapeutic claims-making from their subjects in order to prompt reparative transformation. Frameworks of applied ethics demonstrate the underlying ethical principles that inform criticisms of both *Snog Marry Avoid?* and *The Biggest Loser Australia*; complaints that makeover television's use of humiliation ridicules its subjects reflects an appeal to the Kantian duties against ridicule and defamation, while concerns that makeover television negatively affects subjects or audiences may be understood through the actual consequences of makeover television found in consequentialist ethical arguments. The use of Julia Driver's evaluational externalist framework, furthermore, elucidates moral concerns over the character and motivations of those responsible for the creation of the programs in the first place. In *Snog Marry Avoid*, the use of play may be understood as a mechanism through which self-conscious performances of class and gender are enacted, and the use of playful irony somewhat defuses objections to the program. In *The Biggest Loser Australia*, the problem of obesity is depicted in such a manner that portrays its subjects as helpless, and the program's therapeutic mechanism operates through the neoliberal logic of individual (rather than state or institutional) intervention and the merit of hard work. Ambiguity over the program's exact role in society,

however—whether the program is to be understood as an education or entertainment product—exacerbates complaints that both the use of humiliation and therapy serve unclear purposes (and that this lack of clarity negatively affects the program's ethical value). Although humiliation and therapeutic discourse form a significant of these programs, there is reason to suggest that humiliation is not a prerequisite for makeover television—as reception studies demonstrate, humiliation of a program's contestants may even compromise the program's inspirational value.

Developments concurrent with the writing of this thesis indicate potential movement on this front. The individual-focused makeover subgenre is currently undergoing a contraction in both volume and cultural cachet. *Snog Marry Avoid?* ended its run in 2013; BBC Three, its home channel, ceased terrestrial broadcast in 2016 as part of BBC funding cuts. *Love, Lust or Run*, its American adaptation, has not released new episodes since 2016. The 2017 season of *The Biggest Loser Australia*, titled *The Biggest Loser: Transformed*, was advertised as a scaling back of *The Biggest Loser*'s standard features. Advertising emphasised that the season's contestants would be less dramatically obese than in previous seasons, there would less hostility toward contestants, and weight loss plans would be tailored to promote sustainable improvement even after the program had ended—seemingly a response to the public criticism levelled at the program. This reimagining of the program, devoid of humiliation and shaming, appears to have failed to maintain the viewership of previous seasons. (Network Ten has gone into voluntary administration in the same year; these events may likewise have influenced business decisions surrounding *The Biggest Loser*.) Vivenne Kelly and Aaron Ryan report for *Mumbrella* that *The Biggest Loser: Transformed* has been moved to daytime television and the finale instead hosted on a morning talk program. (The status of the American edition of *The Biggest Loser* is likewise ambiguous, with no announcement on a new season of the program since its previous season ended in February 2016.)

While it is no doubt premature to declare the makeover subgenre dead, it remains unclear at this time what the next iteration of makeover television will look like and how it will be received. The use of both humiliation and therapeutic discourse in makeover television, however, nonetheless produces predictable ethical problems that appear to define the subgenre.

Chapter Three

"Give Them Something That They Want:" Ethical Criticism and Realness in Reality Television Parodies

In 2013, a series of posters advertising new reality television programs were put up across the New York City subway system. Some of the programs, which had titles such as *Married to a Mime*, *Knitting Wars*, *Bayou Eskimos*, and *The Dillionaire* (about a multi-millionaire pickle producer), were also featured in brief teaser trailers uploaded to YouTube by local PBS affiliate WNET (also known as Thirteen)—surprising, considering the programs were advertised as airing on the "THINK Channel," "Wonder Network," and "Culture Network," among others. The programs, of course, were not and are not real. Both the poster advertisements and teaser trailers featured a disclaimer: "the fact you thought this was a real show says a lot about the state of TV. Support quality programming. Join us at thirteen.org" (Molloy). The (fake) advertising was in fact a call to action to support a local public television station, in opposition to what the campaign's social media tag called "#TVGONEWRONG." Thirteen's advertising campaign—reality television parodies that momentarily disrupt their audiences' distinction between factuality and fictionality, and in doing so, impart a corrective message regarding the state of (reality) television—is an example of what is being studied in this chapter.

This chapter analyses case studies from three recent televisual parodies of relationship-themed gamedoc reality television, *Sex House* (The Onion 2012), *Nathan for You* (Comedy Central 2013–), and *UnREAL* (Lifetime 2015–), and considers how these programs cue their audiences to respond to ethical problems in reality television in particular ways. I ask: how do these programs employ reality television conventions in order to comment on the ethics of the genre? How do differences between the programs' use of reality conventions and style affect their critiques of reality television? And finally, how do these programs establish a connection to the historical real in order to cue their audiences to recognise ethical problems in reality television programming? *Sex House*, *Nathan for You* and *UnREAL* employ reality programming conventions to create a heightened depiction of reality television—one which exaggerates reality television in order to highlight underlying ethical issues in the form (most prominently the relationship between reality producers and subjects). Each program also incorporates elements of factuality (or perceived factuality)—*UnREAL* bases its critique of reality television in the experiences of its co-creator Sarah Gertrude Shapiro, *Sex House*'s online platform separates the program from the context of a television channel (and thus particular cues

regarding its parodic nature), and *Nathan for You* involves real (non-actor) subjects who believe the program's fictional elements to be factual. I argue that through these various parodic devices, each program portrays the relationship-themed gamedoc as prone to recurring ethical problems, chiefly in the power imbalance between reality television subject and producer. I begin below by defining parody and satire and outlining some common parodic techniques that are used throughout the case studies in this chapter. I then summarise the concept of television mockumentary, a specific form of television parody, and explain how a parodic text's televisual medium might affect its construction and parodic meaning. I then briefly consider one example of a reality television parody (taken from Charlie Brooker's *Black Mirror*), which critiques the ethical status of the genre, in order to demonstrate how parodic techniques are used to create meaning in a televisual work. I will then apply these principles of parodic works, television parody, and mock-reality television to this chapter's case studies.

Each of the three case studies examined in this chapter is a parody of reality television. These case studies are also, to an extent, satires. As 'parody' and 'satire' are contested terms within the literature, I must clarify the use of these terms within the chapter. As Linda Hutcheon notes in her seminal *Theory of Parody*, 'parody' has been used to mean different types of works across different socio-historical contexts, though Hutcheon nonetheless identifies several "common denominators" (*Theory of Parody* 10). Addressing these commonalities, Hutcheon broadly defines parody as the intentional repetition of a particular text, author, genre, or generic conventions; modern parody (the dominant form since the late nineteenth century) is characterised by "imitation characterized by ironic inversion" and "repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity" (6). Literature scholar Simon Dentith takes a similar approach, defining parody as "any cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice," where this "relatively polemical" imitation can vary in tone and extent from reverential to mocking (9). Film theorist Richard Dyer asserts "parody implies a sure position *outside of that to which it refers*"—that is, parodies by definition express an attitude or meaning that is distinct from the work being parodied (46, emphasis mine). Hutcheon adds that a parodic work's meaning is necessarily reflexive: by its nature, a parodic work adopts a particular attitude to the parody's target text, which is borne out by what is similar and what is different. The broadness of these definitions is convenient, in part, because they attempt to reconcile the definition of 'parody' with those of popular parody-adjacent terms such as *spoof*, *pastiche*, *send-up*, *lampoon*, and so on, which are often used interchangeably with parody or to

indicate a specific parodic intent. The depth of meaning in the simple term “parody,” encapsulating these various other parody-adjacent *parodic works*, is particularly suitable for this chapter’s case studies due to the range of attitudes towards their referent works. For this chapter’s purposes, it suffices to state that the case studies repeat some elements of established texts or sets of convention, invert or modify other elements, and in doing so adopt particular evaluative stances towards their target text(s), which in this case are generally critical of perceived ethical problems in reality television.

Satire is distinguished from parody (as the term is used in this chapter) in virtue of the object of its focus. Hutcheon expresses this in terms of goals: “the aim of parody is intramural and that of satire is extramural—that is, social or moral” (62). Whereas parody is inward-facing and refers to other works, Hutcheon argues, satire is outward-facing and comments on the social world. Hutcheon adds that satire always serves an “ameliorative aim”: that is, satire attacks perceived problems in the world with the implication that these problems ought to be fixed (43). While Hutcheon emphatically argues that parody and satire are and ought to be distinct from each other, media theorist Dan Harries disputes this distinction. Harries argues that because parodic works adopt a particular attitude towards their target text, parodic works invariably evaluate the conditions of the social world from which the text emerges: “satiric discourse is a form of critique, and thus all parody (which always critiques) can be subsumed under a more general mode of satire” (32). As a result, Harries situates parody *within* satire by virtue of its specificity (targeting a text in the social world rather than the world at large). Though I agree with Harries that parody is necessarily satirical, there is nonetheless an implied difference between parodic meaning and satirical meaning—both critique, but to simply refer to parody *as* satire neglects parody’s specific critical impulse, in the first instance, towards a text. For clarity in this chapter, ‘parody’ thus refers to the referencing of another text or genre in order to comment on that text or genre, while ‘satire’ refers to commentary on the world outside of the text being parodied, usually for a critical function. All three of the texts in this chapter are parodies (or ‘parodic works’) but all three also satirise the social world from which their target texts emerge—the programs may, for example, satirise elements of reality television production (which sits outside of a reality television text) or audiences. Parody and satire employ many of the same devices in order to first alert their audiences to their parodic and satirical nature and, secondly, to impart their specific parodic or satirical meaning.

In order for a parodic work to successfully cue its audience to recognise its critical attitude, the work must be identifiable as parodic by the work’s audience. Additionally, the work’s parodic meaning (that is, its stance towards its target text or texts) must be able to

be interpreted. Several elements of parody, which are generally common across parodic works, work to cue these audiences to interpret a parodic text appropriately. Parodic works are by nature based in *repetition* or *reiteration*, the re-use of established and identifiable works or elements of a work. Through reiteration, Harries argues, a parodic work "create[s] an association between the hypotext [target text] and the parody as well as. . . establish[ing] conventional narrative expectations" (43). A reality television parody, for instance, may use recognisable reality television concepts and settings, such as a singing contest in front of several judges as in the *X-Factor* (ITV 2004–), and *Voice* franchises. The second element of parody is *inversion*, the ironic opposition toward or contradiction of established elements of the target text (Harries 55). Inversion separates parodic works from their hypotexts and prompts the audience to recognise a difference of meaning between the parody and the target text. One example of inversion in parody reality television is found in *Burning Love* (Yahoo! Screen 2012–2013), a parody of the *Bachelor* family of programs. Whereas the 'bachelor' contestant in these programs is usually depicted as intelligent and well-spoken, *Burning Love*'s contestant Mark Orlando (Ken Marino) is slow-witted and ineloquent. This inversion both cues the audience to recognise that *Burning Love* is parodic (because this depiction is incongruent with regular expectations of a *Bachelor*-style reality program), and forms part of the program's parodic meaning (*Burning Love* undermines the emotional gravity of reality television by depicting it as ridiculous). Harries identifies several other parodic techniques, each of which are included in this chapter's case studies: *misdirection*, a function of both repetition and inversion in which elements of the target texts are at first repeated, only to be suddenly inverted (62), *extraneous inclusion*, in which elements foreign to the target text (including elements from other texts) are unexpectedly present, further disrupting the parody's repetition of the original target text (77), and *exaggeration*, in which a parody repeats "elements of the [target text] . . .beyond their conventionally expected limits" (83). (Exaggeration is also a common satirical technique; arguments or beliefs may be ironically endorsed to the point of extremity in order to point out perceived contradictions or flaws in the original argument.) While Harries' study is concerned with film parody, the above techniques are fairly common across parodic mediums. Of interest to this chapter is the mockumentary form of parody, particularly those mockumentary works which appear on television.

Mockumentaries are works which mimic the stylistic and narrative strategies of documentary. By using the elements of factual programming to depict fictional subject matter, mockumentaries question documentary's ability to record factuality—as media

theorists Alexandra Juhasz and Jesse Lerner assert, mockumentaries "imply, sometimes state, and often critique the crucial relations between documentary and the textual and actual authority it assumes" (2–3). Because these works consciously draw on the conventions of a pre-existing genre while distinguishing themselves from the original work, mockumentaries can be considered a specific type of documentary parody. Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight define mockumentaries (which they originally label 'mock-documentaries') as "*fictional* texts . . . which make a partial or concerted effort to appropriate documentary codes and conventions in order to represent a fictional subject" (emphasis original) (2). For the purposes of this chapter, this definition also generally applies to what might be called 'mock-reality programming,' parodic works that appropriate the style of reality television (which itself draws on aesthetic and narrative strategies from documentary and other factual forms of programming). Mockumentaries, like other parodic works, rely on cues which signal the works' fictionality and in turn prompts reflexive evaluation of documentary—"mock-documentar[ies] address[ ] a knowing and media-literate viewer" who is able to recognise these cues (Roscoe and Hight 52). This reflexivity is often explicitly critical of documentary or reality television ethics; in reference to "Ambush," an episode of *ER* (NBC 1994–2009) presented in mock-reality style, Roscoe and Hight note "[t]here is the sense here that these types of Reality-TV [sic] programs need to be reintegrated back into the documentary fold, to have more awareness of their ethical responsibilities" (137). Hight details several characteristics of television mockumentary that shape the form: the televisual structuring of episodes and commercial interruptions, the enhanced intertextuality of televisual works, and the viewing conditions in which audiences engage with television texts (81–92). (Some of these characteristics of televisual media are deliberately manipulated for parodic effect in *Sex House.*) Mockumentary television's intertextuality is both a function of the form's *parodic* character—by definition, parodic works reference another text or set of conventions—and its status as television, which in turn relies upon segmented narratives interrupted by other texts, as well as a presumed audience familiarity with those other texts. These traits are unique to the form of televisual parody and thus inform how television mockumentary operates. As such, these characteristics of television parody bear some further consideration.

The structure of television programming and the manner in which audiences engage with television influences both how television parodies are constructed and how they are received and interpreted. A television text, in its original broadcast, is made up of episodes released over a delayed period of time (one episode per week for all three of this chapter's case studies), broken up into seasons (*Sex House* was a single self-contained

mini-season), and with commercial interruptions further segmenting individual episodes (less applicable to *Sex House*, which is hosted through YouTube). Programs with a persistent season-long storyline, as in *Sex House* and *UnREAL*, must account for temporal interruptions to a continuing narrative. Sitcom-style programs with self-contained episodic narratives rely on audience familiarity with the program's premise, setting, and characters (and on making these elements familiar across repeated viewings). Both present opportunities and challenges for creating parodic meaning. In reference to *Reno 911!* (Comedy Central, 2003–2009), a "mocku-soap" parody of American law enforcement docu-soaps (most notably *Cops*), Hight observes that "simply through sheer repetition of parodying television stereotypes and the exhaustive exploration of narrative possibilities over a number of seasons, [*Reno 911!*] is a comprehensive deconstruction of the language and aesthetic of televised police enforcement" (243). *Reno 911!*'s repetition of the docu-soap form thus allows for a depth of parodic meaning, though Hight also recognises that the series' "richness of detail . . . is not always apparent when viewing any single episode . . . any satirical effect from *Reno 911!* is accumulative, and more likely to be apparent to regular viewers of the series" (243–244). Some elements of television parody may be discerned from an individual episode—a viewer might recognise parodic cues, determine that the work is parodic, and successfully interpret fragments of a work's parodic intent—but this would nonetheless represent only a part of the program's overall meaning insofar as a single episode constitutes only part of a larger work (i.e., the story arc, season, or television series as a whole). Reality television parodies with story arcs spanning multiple episodes similarly rely on consistent viewing; audiences who see only fragments of the program may miss plot elements that create parodic meaning. The case studies analysed in this chapter address this aspect of television structure in various ways, aimed at both establishing audience familiarity with the program (and establishing continuity of narrative), and in some cases, to intentionally disrupt continuity or defamiliarise the text to the audience for parodic and satirical effect.

Parody and satire have a strong relationship to ethical criticism. Many parodic works are known for their strong moral positions. An example from television is found in "Fifteen Million Merits," the second episode of the first season of science-fiction anthology series *Black Mirror* (Channel 4, 2011–14 and Netflix, 2016–), which features a parody of reality television talent programs called *Hot Shot*. *Hot Shot* resembles popular British reality programs *X-Factor* and *Britain's Got Talent*, with one judge (often wearing aviator sunglasses) seemingly a caricature of Simon Cowell. "Fifteen Million Merits" is set in a dystopic near-future where most people must exercise on bike-like machines to generate

‘merits,’ a currency used to pay for everything. Individuals’ cell-like rooms are lined with monitors that constantly play advertisements—primarily pornography and reality shows—which can only be skipped or muted at the cost of merits. Advertising for *Hot Shot* indicates that successful contestants on the program are granted certain privileges; one contestant lists being able to choose one’s own clothes and look out a window to the outside world as benefits of her success. After hearing Abi (Jessica Brown Findlay) sing, Bing (Daniel Kaluuya) buys her a ticket to enter *Hot Shot*—costing his entire savings of fifteen million merits, a value representing over six months’ work—so he may see “something real.” Abi is drugged immediately before performing (standard for all contestants), and while her performance is called the “best of the season” all three judges recommend she would be better suited to performing in pornography (one judge is the head of a production company), which Abi, cajoled by the crowd, reluctantly accepts. Dejected (and now unable to skip advertisements featuring Abi), Bing works ceaselessly to earn another fifteen million merits and purchase a ticket on *Hot Shot*. Pulling a glass shard from his pants and holding it to his neck, Bing rails against contemporary society on live television:

> The faker the fodder is, the more you love it, because fake fodder's the only thing that works any more. Fake fodder is all that we can stomach. Actually, not quite all. Raw pain, raw viciousness… that we can take. Yeah, stick a fat man up a pole, we laugh ourselves feral, because we've earned the right, we've done solid time and he's slacking, the scum, so ha-ha-ha at him!

A judge describes Bing’s diatribe as “the most heartfelt thing I’ve seen on this stage since *Hot Shot* began!” and offers Bing a television show in which he can decry the system, “thirty minutes, twice a week,” which receives rapturous applause from the audience. Bing enjoys material benefits of his success—the episode ends with Bing “looking over outside” as referenced earlier in the episode—at the cost of his moral integrity. In a single hour-long episode (as *Black Mirror* is an anthology series, individual episodes feature self-contained narratives), “Fifteen Million Merits” condemns reality television and its cultural significance in harsh terms, particularly in Bing’s cynical willingness to go against his own values for personal gain. *Black Mirror* positions reality television as symptomatic and supportive of cultural decline—reality television is “fake fodder” that is nonetheless appealing to the point where “fake fodder” is the dominant cultural output. Reality television is also shown to be a corrupting force—despite his hatred of the system, Bing cannot help but agree that the benefits of his own show “beats the bike” (i.e., mundane employment); the easy stardom of reality television is distasteful but nonetheless attractive, and made all the more

distasteful *because* it is attractive. While the episode's setting is unfamiliar (taking place at an unspecified time in the future and featuring advanced technology), the program's depiction of reality television is recognisable because it exaggerates common elements of reality television, as well as common attitudes towards reality television that the program's audience may be sympathetic towards. In the case of "Fifteen Million Merits," these parodic aspects are heightened for shocking dramatic effect. The moral character (or immoral character) of reality television is likewise heightened: Abi's shift from reality contestant to pornographic actress is exaggeratedly abrupt, and this exaggeration manifests an implied truth regarding reality television's fast fame and lack of moral character. The program's critical stance towards reality television is clear: reality television is morally corrupting.

Black Mirror uses *Hot Shot* as a show-within-a-show to critique not only how reality television programming is produced, but also to demonstrate the immediate effects of such programming on its participants, as well as suggesting how reality television affects broader society. *UnREAL*, the first of the case studies analysed in this chapter, likewise features a fictional reality program (with clear real-world parallels) within the framework of a narrative drama for similar effect.

UnREAL and Realness of Experience

UnREAL is a scripted drama program currently airing in the United States on the Lifetime network. Created by Sarah Gertrude Shapiro and Marti Noxon, *UnREAL* is based on Shapiro's 2013 short film *Sequin Raze*; both works are inspired by Shapiro's tenure as a producer on nine seasons of NBC's *The Bachelor*. *UnREAL*'s ethical critique of reality television takes up two main points. Firstly, that reality television presents an artificial view of the real ('unreal'), and this false representation of reality is inherently unethical on account of its deceptive nature (an argument that aligns with a Kantian perspective's critique of reality television). Secondly, *UnREAL* posits that in the process of constructing this artificial representation of the real, reality television producers inflict real and serious harm on their program's participants. Shapiro's real-world experience as a reality television producer, and the extent to which this experience informs *UnREAL*, is heavily referenced in metatextual material. This material, I argue, creates an implicit claim of authority regarding *UnREAL*'s critique of reality television, and this connection to lived experience lends a perceived authenticity—a special kind of realness—to the otherwise fictional narrative of the program.

UnREAL stars Shiri Appleby as Rachel Goldberg, a producer on the *Bachelor*-like dating reality competition *Everlasting*, who at the beginning of the first season is brought back to work by executive producer Quinn King (Constance Zimmer) after suffering an on-screen breakdown at the end of *Everlasting*'s previous season. The program's storylines generally revolve around Rachel and Quinn's manipulation of *Everlasting*'s contestants and suitor (the bachelor analogue); Rachel is regarded as a 'closer,' a producer who is able to provoke dramatic reactions and soundbites from contestants in order to produce a compelling narrative. A recurring theme of the program is Rachel's moral discomfort with her job, despite her excellence in the role, and the emotional stress she endures as a result of her actions. As the series progresses, the production crew of *Everlasting* make increasingly questionable moral decisions, leading to dark results: a contestant is not informed of her father's hospitalisation until it is too late to see him before he dies, a contestant's medication for bipolar disorder is withheld and she eventually commits suicide during production, and Rachel is publically humiliated (again) at the close of the first season, though she also secures her position in the *Everlasting* crew.

UnREAL's primary parodic device is its shifting of perspective between the 'in-universe' final product of *Everlasting* and the 'reality' behind the scenes of the program, thereby drawing out the apparent contradictions between the two. This is used almost immediately in the program's first episode, "Pilot." The episode opens with a warmly-lit crane shot showing the *Everlasting* mansion, which dissolves into a shot of a horse-drawn carriage arriving at the house. Soft guitar music underscores the mood of the scene. Over this setting, however, is the stern, disembodied voice of Quinn addressing her producers as she watches the footage: "okay, here we go, opening night, *Everlasting*, alright? Let's give them something that they want." There is a cut to the inside of *Everlasting*'s production room—lit with sterile blue lighting, and filled with screens showing the set from multiple camera angles—as Quinn continues: "ponies, princesses, romance, love, I don't know, it's all a bunch of crap anyway." Quinn intrudes upon the scene, first audibly and then visually, breaking any sense of a fairy-tale atmosphere that is suggested by the initial shots (reinforced by her dialogue). While Quinn is part of *Everlasting*, she is physically separated and emotionally detached from the show's fiction; she is a cynical viewer who recognises the program is "a bunch of crap" to give the audience "something that they want." *UnREAL* thus cues its audience, watching Quinn on a screen watching *Everlasting*'s participants on many screens, to similarly approach *Everlasting*—and reality television as a whole—with the same critical detachment.

UnREAL presents the artificiality of *Everlasting* (and *The Bachelor* as well as reality television at large) as ethically unacceptable both in itself and on account of its consequences. One such example of an ethical failing is in the *Everlasting* producers' treatment of the *Everlasting* contestants. As revealed over the course of the first episode, many of the *Everlasting* contestants have been cast to fulfil various reality television archetypes. A large narrative component of *UnREAL*'s early episodes consist of the producers attempting to steer the contestants into these roles. In constructing *Everlasting*'s narrative, the producers are complicit in the propagation of regressive attitudes regarding the contestants involved. The program's reliance on these stereotypes is shown to be completely cynical, as contestants are cast based to fit predetermined character roles: Quinn protests the arrival of the first contestant, Shamiqua (Christie Laing), on the grounds that Shamiqua's race (she is African-American) precludes her from being cast in the 'wifey' role. "It's not my fault America's racist" Quinn says dismissively; her wording cuing *UnREAL*'s audience to question this claim and consider reality television's (especially *The Bachelor*'s) role in perpetuating racial stereotypes. (In *UnREAL*'s second season, Quinn and Rachel pitch an African-American suitor for the next season of *Everlasting*, on the basis of the potential titillation of an interracial relationship.) Similarly, as Quinn mocks the arrival of Mary, a single mother who is older than the other contestants, Rachel expresses brief concern over Quinn's plans to cast Mary as an insecure older woman, citing Mary's previous abusive relationship and possible mental health concerns. Quinn responds: "and that is why we cast her. For the crazy. Alright? Besides, she knew what she was in for. They all do. [The] Crazier the better." Quinn's cynical exploitation of Mary's condition (in-fiction, Mary is never considered a potential winner of *Everlasting* by the producers; she has been cast solely to provide dramatic possibilities via her status as a single mother and her mental health) is reprehensible in itself, to the extent where even the *Everlasting* producers (minus Quinn) have moral qualms. These objections ultimately amount to nothing, however, as the other producers go along with Quinn's direction for the program; the producers' attempts to further destabilise Mary's emotional state culminate with Mary committing suicide on set at the end of the first season's sixth episode, "Fly." Quinn's reassurance that the contestants 'know what they are in for' is quickly shown to be false, as many of the producers work to orchestrate events without the contestants knowing.

UnREAL asserts an authoritative basis for its parodic critique of reality television from two main sources: its audience's pre-existing attitudes regarding reality television, and *UnREAL*'s ostensible basis in the real-life experiences of its co-creator Shapiro. *UnREAL* assumes its audience has a familiarity with *The Bachelor*, and its critique of the

program similarly assumes its audience holds similar views regarding reality television. As Carroll observes, "[a]rtworks . . . trade in moral commonplaces . . . [t]hey are not a source of moral education, *but depend upon and presuppose already morally educated readers, viewers, and listeners*" (emphasis mine) ("Moderate Moralism" 229). The notion that *UnREAL* simply reiterates commonly-held attitudes towards reality television is common, including in popular criticism of the program. With reference to Quinn's "it's not my fault America is racist," Silpa Kovvali notes in *New Republic*: "when we see her encouraging stereotypical behaviour and imposing imagined limitations we realize—*as we're meant to*—that yes, it kind of is." As critic Kathryn VanArendonk asserts in *Vulture*, "like all great fiction, *there is an unmistakable thrumming foundation of truth* [in *UnREAL*]" (emphasis mine). VanArendonk's use of 'truth' here relates to a kind of perceptual truth—that is, that *UnREAL*'s parodic meaning corresponds with its audience's perception of *The Bachelor*. *UnREAL*'s function, VanArendonk suggests, is as a companion piece to *The Bachelor*, in order to sharpen the reality television viewer's critical eye: "[t]he very thing that makes *The Bachelor* work—how well-hidden the strings are, that perpetual doubt about what is real, the knowledge that what we're seeing is only the tip of the production iceberg—makes us thirsty for the perspective *UnREAL* provides."

Shapiro's own experiences as a producer on *The Bachelor* also strongly inform popular understanding of *UnREAL*. In an interview with Karen Tongson for *Public Books*, Shapiro has commented: "shows like that feel like a guilty pleasure. . . . But when you start ripping people apart that way, you're eventually going to turn that lens on yourself." Shapiro's invocation of *The Bachelor* as a "guilty pleasure" resembles the arguments of communication scholar Dana Cloud, who considers the ironic enjoyment of *The Bachelor*'s (false) depiction of romantic love. Cloud argues "viewers' creative and creative responses [ironic responses] to *The Bachelor* do not necessarily mitigate its ideological complicity with an oppressively gendered social order" (418). *UnREAL* demonstrates the instability the romantic fantasy (on both *The Bachelor* and *Everlasting*) and the deleterious effects of this fantasy. Rachel's narrative arc—in which she struggles with her occupation's impact on her mental health—mirrors the real-life experience of Shapiro, who has commented in popular coverage about her nervous breakdown working on *The Bachelor* prompting her exit from reality television.

Comparisons between Rachel and Shapiro abound in popular coverage of the program. This comparison implicitly lends authority to *UnREAL*'s parody of reality television, and by extension its critique of reality television ethics. In a brief story for *Deadline*, Amanda N'Duka draws an explicit connection between Shapiro's tenure on *The*

Bachelor and the events of *UnREAL*, commenting "[t]he premise of Lifetime's *UnReal* [sic] was *very real* at a certain point in time for co-creator/executive producer Sarah Gertrude Shapiro" (emphasis mine). In response to a quote from Shapiro that her experience with *The Bachelor* made her "a mastermind at manipulating and destroying women," N'Duka observes "Shapiro's experience sounds much like *UnReal*'s [sic] lead character Rachel." Referencing Shapiro's negotiations with the Lifetime network, who pressed for Rachel to have more romantic entanglements in *UnREAL*'s second season (including the return of Rachel's off-and-on lover Jeremy), D. T. Max for the *New Yorker* comments: "[l]ike Rachel, Shapiro frequently has to decide whether she is a bomb-thrower or an inside player with misgivings." Yet another article, by Caitlin PenzyMoog for the *A.V. Club*, draws a further parallel between *UnREAL* and Shapiro's relationship with Lifetime:

> To add another layer of metatext to the realities of crafting a scripted drama out of a reality show, the deeply complex relationship between Rachel and showrunner Quinn sound [sic] similar to the antagonistic relationship between Shapiro and the veteran showrunner paired with her, Marti Noxon.

While Shapiro maintains that the events of *UnREAL* are not based specifically on her experience with *The Bachelor* (though the concept is undoubtedly inspired by the program) the apparent similarities between the two also inform popular coverage of both programs, generally in reference to *UnREAL*'s perceived fidelity. In a news article about the *Bachelor in Paradise* scandal appearing in *Vox*, Caroline Framke draws an explicit connection to *UnREAL*: "the extreme lengths to which *UnREAL*'s producer characters go to get their contestants to bend and break . . . are intentionally horrifying – and, according to real-life *Bachelor* contestants, *not entirely hyperbolic*" (emphasis mine). These comparisons serve to defictionalise *UnREAL* by reinforcing the program's connection to its dual inspirations of Shapiro and *The Bachelor*.

UnREAL's critique of *The Bachelor* (and reality television as a whole) cues its audience to recognise and reflect on pre-existing attitudes regarding *The Bachelor*. Likewise, *UnREAL*'s basis in the experiences of its co-creator, Shapiro, is also used to lend authority to its critique of reality television. Both of these connections to the historical real are emphasised in popular coverage of *UnREAL* in order to direct its audience's attention to the program's ethical claims.

Sex House **and Imagined Realness**

Sex House is produced by Onion Digital Studios, a division of parody news outlet The Onion, and it was released on both Onion Digital Studios' website and online video

streaming platform YouTube in 2012, with episodes uploaded on a weekly basis. Of the case studies considered in this chapter, *Sex House* is perhaps the most straightforwardly mock reality-style program along the lines of Roscoe and Hight's definition of mockumentary, in that it is a fictional, scripted program that is presented as an authentic reality program. In this section, I analyse two main points of *Sex House*'s critique of reality television ethics: the mistreatment of reality television contestants by producers and the inability of reality television to present a coherent, truthful account of reality. I also consider *Sex House*'s mode of presentation and its online platform, both of which work to divorce the program from traditional parodic signifiers found in broadcast television parodies. These characteristics, I argue, suggest that an inattentive audience of the program would not immediately recognise program as parodic. Audience understanding and appreciation of *Sex House*'s parodic and satirical meaning is in part derived from the suggestion of an *imagined* audience who are not 'in on the joke' and unable to discern the program's meaning—as Juhasz remarks, "[s]uccessful fake docs either demand an 'educated' viewer or teach their viewers to be smarter" (10).

Sex House's ostensible premise, as revealed in its opening credits, is simple: "six sexy Americans alone in a house with nothing to do but get nasty… This is *Sex House*." *Sex House* stylistically and narratively resembles multiple reality programs. *Real World* (formerly *The Real World*, MTV 1992–) is a close aesthetic comparison; in an online Reddit 'Ask Me Anything' session, *Sex House* director Geoff Haggerty notes that the series' director of photography, Mark Niedelson, had worked on a season of *Real World* ("We are Onion Digital Studios"). Haggerty claims, too, that "[Onion Digital Studios' writers] watched a lot of *Jersey Shore*/*Real World* and *Antiques Roadshow* and tried to just nail the aesthetic as best we [could]," again suggesting *Real World* to be a close point of comparison for *Sex House*.

While the program appears at first to be little more than a lewd 'social experiment,' *Sex House*'s casting offers an early cue of the program's parodic nature. The main cast, as introduced in the program's first episode "Meet the Nymphos," consists of Jay (Boyd Harris), an obnoxious alpha-male personality; Alex (Lea Pascal), an 'alternative' and sexually forward young woman, and Tara (Ashley Lobo), a blonde former cheerleader and self-proclaimed "party girl." Erin (Fiona Robert) is an eighteen-year-old virgin from a rural Midwestern town. Frank (Jesse Dabson) is a forty-five-year-old accountant with a wife and two children, who won a contest to appear on the show and is ostensibly participating in the program to make new friends; Derek (Chris Boykin) is the only person of colour on the program, and is denoted by a chyron simply as "homosexual" (compared to Tara, "ex-

cheerleader," and Erin, "18yrs. old.") Four of the six main participants (Jay, Alex, Tara, and Erin) are more or less repetitions of established reality 'characters' with some minor exaggerations. Their inclusion in *Sex House* is logical: all four are invested in the show's premise, serve the program's expected narrative (seeing attractive young people have sex), and are expected character types for this type of program. Conversely, Frank and Derek are notable in the apparent illogic of their inclusion. Frank is a generation older than the other characters; in contrast, across thirty-two seasons of *Real World* involving 252 participants, there has never been a participant older than twenty-six at time of filming. Derek is similarly marked by his presence as the only person of colour and, as he realises over the course of the first episode, the only gay man in the house. Derek's inclusion is particularly notable given *Sex House*'s parallels with *Real World*: as communication theorist Catherine Squires observes, *Real World* commonly casts according to a "specific 'racial conflict' script," in which participants are cast with the intent of creating racial conflict, "pitting the different Whites (the liberal, the gay, the intellectual, the slut, etc.) against . . . the (often) lone Black cast members" (434–5). Frank and Derek's inclusion subverts typical construction of reality programming.

Sex House's critical stance regarding the treatment of reality participants becomes clear as the series' narrative progresses with the introduction of disturbing subject matter and the sudden intrusion of grim elements. These plot developments, which are unexpected elements from outside of *Sex House*'s main reality television referents, both exaggerate the extent to which the participants are being mistreated and disrupt *Sex House*'s stylistic and narrative consistency to the form. At the end of the first episode, Frank and Erin drunkenly have sex; the other housemates, noting the difference in Frank and Erin's ages and the thought of Frank's family, are disgusted. In the second episode, "Sexy Truth or Sexy Dare," Frank and Erin are provided with a gift basket from the producers as a reward for their sex. Frank's actions have alienated the other participants, and Erin falls into a depressive state. By the fourth episode, "Erin Bares it All," Erin reveals is pregnant with Frank's child. Derek attempts to leave the house to take a walk, only to find the house's single exterior door locked from the outside (unlike in *Real World*, where participants are free to come and go as they please). It becomes apparent that the contestants are trapped in the house. Several horrific accidents take place: in "Sexy Truth or Sexy Dare" Tara is burned by a vent spewing hot air, and in the third episode, "Get on that Pole!" a pole-dancing instructor brought in to teach the women exotic dance breaks her leg. The accident is punctuated by the sudden, unexpected appearance of gore—bone visibly sticking out of flesh—as the instructor is hurriedly removed from the house by

anonymous production crew with digitally-blurred faces. In “Erin Bares it All,” the program’s host (only ever referred to as Host) suddenly appears (claiming to have been present the entire time, which the contestants have no memory of), withholding food from the contestants in order to coerce them into having sex. In the eighth episode, “Orgy Scheming,” the participants finally rebel against the production, attacking the house and accidentally killing a member of crew. A masked man (implicitly sent by the program’s producers) arrives to attack the contestants with a baton. After being brutally beaten (with footage captured via a surveillance-style high-angle black-and-white camera), Frank manages to knock out the attacker, while the other contestants and camera crew hide in a bedroom.

Over the course of the series, *Sex House*’s parody of reality television is intruded upon by narrative elements from the horror and slasher genres. These cross-generic intrusions conflate horror and reality television by reconfiguring what are at first conventions of reality narrative (participants receiving a reward for having sex) into elements of horror narrative (the threat of being denied food until the participants have sex). The sudden and unexpected presence of gore (the exotic dancer’s broken leg) is reminiscent of both horror narrative and what media theorist Cynthia Freeland calls the “ordinary horror” found in reality television programming depicting violence crime and medical emergencies (244). Whereas Freeland observes that these programs typically operate within discourses of security (the audience are safe from the events depicted) and reassurance (the events depicted are swiftly resolved by competent social authorities), emphasising the successful management of horrifying events (254), *Sex House* takes an opposite approach—the instructor is removed from sight and the threat of more violence remains open. This invocation of horror tropes in this case calls into question reality television’s ability to provide a secure environment for its subjects—even going so far as to suggest that the *Sex House* subjects are deliberately being put into danger. The locked-in space of the Sex House, which resembles the similarly panopticon-like construction of the *Big Brother* house, is likewise reconfigured into an object of horror. With regards to the design of the *Big Brother* house, media theorist Jonathan Bignell observes “the homeliness and attractiveness of the *Big Brother* house exist at the cost of the enforcement of its spatial boundaries, at the same time as these boundaries are reassuring, protective” (124). In adopting elements of horror, *Sex House* transforms the “reassuring, protective” space of the reality television house into an inversely claustrophobic, threatening setting akin to the isolated spaces of *Saw* (Wan 2004). The dislocation of time similarly works to create an oppressive atmosphere. Bignell asserts that

the unmarked passing of time in *Big Brother* creates an environment of "enforced leisure, except for artificially imposed work" (124). In *Sex House*, *Big Brother*'s "artificially imposed work" is sex—in this case, an activity that would otherwise be perceived as leisure is now commoditised *as* work. In the setting of the Sex House, the ambiguous passing of time takes on a malevolent character: over the course of the series the participants begin to exhibit extreme visible signs of malnutrition and weariness, suggesting an internment of several months.

Sex House's horror turn also calls into question the (fictional) program's ability to present a coherent account of real events via the introduction of an ambiguous framing. Episode nine, "Sex Climax," opens with a voiceover announcing "previously, on *Sex House*…" (Despite the "previously" disclaimer, this event has not been shown onscreen in any previous episode). The scene, which takes place in a previously unseen conference room in an anonymous office, features a conversation between what are assumed to be studio executives discussing *Sex House*, their faces and voices disguised by post-production effects (the executives are unnamed in the original episode and are here numbered for the sake of clarity):

ONE: What's the situation with *Sex House*?

TWO: Our sponsors dropped.

THREE: The cast are all duds. They won't cooperate, won't respond to threats.

TWO: I refuse to think about this anymore. Shut down *Sex House*.

THREE: Fine. We'll salvage something and put it up on the web.

TWO: We can always make people watch pre-roll for terrible gum or something.

ONE: Great. That's our plan.

The exchange retroactively gives *Sex House* the quality of found footage—itself reminiscent of found-footage horror works such as *The Blair Witch Project* (Myrick and Sanchez 1999). This technique is one of several strategies of narrative dislocation used throughout the series—similarly, each episode ends with a "next time, on *Sex House*" segment, the footage of which never comes to pass onscreen and is never acknowledged as having occurred. In refusing to maintain a logical narrative, *Sex House* likewise challenges reality television's claim to present a coherent account of real events.

Sex House's final episode, "Reunion," marks a complete dislocation from the program's previously established narrative, representing a complete collapse of reality programming narrative logic. Ostensibly a "live reunion special," an episode concept common in reality television programming (including *Real World*, *Big Brother*, and *The Bachelor* family of programs), "Reunion" outright disregards any sort of continuity from the

episode immediately previous, which saw the *Sex House* contestants carve out a primitive subsistence commune roughly nine months (Erin's baby is depicted) after the timeline of previous episodes. The characters appear largely unaffected by the traumatic experience of the program: seemingly significant details (such as Erin's pregnancy) are quickly dismissed (Erin offhandedly reveals she gave the child up for adoption), while new plot elements are abruptly introduced (the characters reference Tara having frequent seizures throughout the show, which was apparently "left on the cutting room floor"), and characters themselves appear to have become disconnected from any previous fixed identity (Derek casually reveals "I'm heterosexual now" to uproarious applause from the 'live studio audience'). "Reunion" is itself a disruption to an established, predictable pattern (that is, the unravelling of *Sex House*'s adherence to reality narrative); the character and plot development of the previous nine episodes has been deconstructed and reassembled into a new narrative almost completely devoid of context. In answer to another question regarding the sequence of events between episodes nine and ten, *Sex House* writer Chris Sartinsky comments: "In nine they've [the contestants] given up all hopes of being normal human beings, and in ten they are well into the only lives now available to them as former reality show rejects. *They have been destroyed*" (emphasis added) ("We are Onion Digital Studios"). Sartinsky's use of the term "destroyed," while ambiguous, potentially refers to the participants being destroyed in a metaphysical sense—that is, having 'sold out,' they have become decoupled from their previously-fixed identities (their souls). The ambiguity surrounding "Reunion," particularly in light of its relationship with the rest of the series, seems deliberately intended to confuse viewers and possibly to prompt a reflexive re-evaluation of reality television's ability to represent the real.

As well as the repetition of established reality television conventions, *Sex House* also establishes a link to the real through its online method of transmission. Unlike *Nathan for You* and *UnREAL*, *Sex House* did not air on broadcast television, and is only available through Onion Digital Studios' website and *The Onion*'s official YouTube channel. This means *Sex House* is not accessed and viewed in the same way a television broadcast is, and so lacks many of the same signifiers. While *Nathan for You*, for example, is hosted on the Comedy Central network (and thus its channel identification cues its audience to recognise it as ironically coded), the only suggestion of *Sex House*'s parodic nature outside of the text itself comes from its *Onion* branding (and its YouTube category tag as "comedy," but that tag is not prominently displayed in YouTube's video descriptors), which relies on audience familiarity with the *Onion*'s status as a parody news outlet. YouTube's algorithm for displaying videos, however, means that some viewers who arrive at *Sex*

House through the platform itself, and are not familiar with the Onion as a satirical outlet, may at a cursory glance perceive *Sex House* to be a genuine reality-style web series. *Sex House*'s construction, furthermore, appears to have been deliberately designed to attract viewers unfamiliar with the *Onion* brand. Almost every episode title (bar "Reunion") uses the word "sex" or a similar suggestive term, and episode thumbnails are likewise titillating, relying on out-of-context imagery of characters in compromising positions. *Sex House*'s keywords appear to have successfully distorted its positioning on YouTube; on an unregistered 'anonymous' viewing (that is, without a YouTube account or viewing history for the platform's algorithm to base recommendations on), suggestions for similar videos are sexual in nature (rather than *Onion* videos or other comedy videos). These recommendations, which are drawn from both keywords and other users' viewing habits, suggest that a non-negligible number of users that come across *Sex House* have found the program, deliberately or accidentally, while searching for sexual content on YouTube or through a generated recommendation based on similar videos. Without context, the first episode of *Sex House* might plausibly be mistaken for a (poor-quality) web reality series. Many top comments on the series' first and second episodes ("Meet the Nymphos" and "Sexy Truth or Sexy Dare") refer to the idea that real or imagined viewers have not successfully discerned the program's parodic intent, expressing amusement or frustration. Comments on "Meet the Nymphos" include "you know how spot on this parody is when SO many people think it's a real show" (by user "binarystar300"), ". . . the fact that people can't tell this is a fake show proves how idiotic people are for falling for the real shows" (by "VejyMonsta"), and "I honestly don't understand all the downvotes [negative reactions to the video]… do 9,000 people seriously not understand satirical [sic] comedy?" (by "Hazel Hallas").

I do not mean to suggest that a significant number of *Sex House* viewers mistake the program for reality, or indeed that *Sex House*'s parody is so subtle as to successfully deceive viewers into believing it as truth—the direction of the series beyond the first two episodes makes that claim improbable. Even *Sex House*'s first two episodes arguably contain sufficient parodic signalling so as to alert a competent viewer (who is familiar with the codes and conventions of American reality television) as to the program's fictional status. As Hutcheon asserts, "a writer has to be able to assume a certain cultural homogeneity" that predisposes their target audience to comprehending the work (79).

What *is* notable among *Sex House*'s self-selecting top comments, however, is an outward-focused recognition of the program's parodic nature; specifically, the oft-repeated perception that *some* viewers will be fooled, or will not watch the program for long enough

to detect its parodic nature, or will not successfully interpret parodic meaning from the program (usually in opposition to the commenter, who 'gets the joke'). These comments echo similar coverage regarding occasions when parodic *Onion* articles have been mistaken for real news. These comments arguably signify a moral judgement applied to a hypothetical audience's cognitive failings; the disbelief that, for example, nine thousand viewers would rate the video negatively do "not understand satirical comedy" certainly carries with it the assumption that these viewers *ought to*, and that by making this declaration the commenter is declaring a normative standard has been breached. Interestingly, this moral blame is assigned to an imagined viewer for not being competent in decoding parody, rather than to *Sex House* for lacking adequate parodic signalling.

There is a case to be made that the inability of audiences to properly interpret *Sex House*'s parodic meaning constitutes an aesthetic—and indeed ethical—failing on the part of the *Sex House* producers. Carroll argues: "[m]any artworks, such as narrative artworks, address the moral understanding. When that address is defective, we may say that the work is morally defective. . . . that moral defect may count as an aesthetic blemish" ("Moderate Moralism" 234). If a parodic work's failure to successfully communicate its parodic meaning can be regarded as an aesthetic failing—*Sex House*'s parodic nature is a critical element of its interpretive meaning—then its inability to successfully communicate a (moral) message (that is, in parodying the ethical problems of reality television) may also constitute a moral failure. Some qualification is necessary here, however; it seems unreasonable to suppose that if any one viewer is unable to successfully understand *Sex House*'s critique of reality television then this constitutes a moral failing for the program. It is possible that this hypothetical viewer is unaware of *Sex House*'s referents (and thus cannot easily identify the program as parodic), or lacks familiarity with *Sex House*'s parodic devices, or is simply not paying attention. It seems impractical to suggest that all parodies must be easily understood by all audiences; as Hutcheon asserts, parody's "constraints are deliberate and, indeed, necessary to its comprehension," and a 'successful' parody thus requires competence on the part of both "decoder" and "encoder" (37). While *Sex House*'s obfuscated parodic signalling *may* be considered an aesthetic and moral flaw of the text, the program nonetheless assumes a certain viewer competence.

As with Thirteen's reality television parody, *Sex House*'s appeal as a parodic text might well be enhanced by the perception that the viewer or an *imagined*, hypothetical viewer would (at least momentarily) believe the program to be real. *Sex House*'s mode of

access, which makes the program particularly susceptible to out-of-context viewing, further contributes to this perception.

Nathan for You and Realness of Performance

"My name is Nathan Fielder, and I graduated from one of Canada's top business schools with really good grades," opens Comedy Central's *Nathan for You*, "[and] now, I'm using my knowledge to help struggling small business owners make it in this competitive world." *Nathan for You*'s opening moments present the program's premise as a business makeover program along the lines of *Restaurant: Impossible* (Food Network, 2011–16), *Undercover Boss* (CBS, 2010–) and *Hotel Inspector* (Channel 5, 2005–). *Nathan for You* is in fact a parody of the business makeover subgenre of reality television, and Fielder's persona on the program—socially awkward, insecure and passive—is a fictionalised version of himself, all of which is (presumably) unknown to the program's subjects. Fielder remains in character throughout the entirety of *Nathan for You*, akin to Stephen Colbert's fictional persona as a conservative pundit depicted on *The Colbert Report* (Comedy Central 2005–14). As on that program, much of the program's humour relies on the ironic distance between the opinions and beliefs of Fielder's character and Fielder himself. Following a brief summary of the program's usual format, this section analyses one specific case study which marks a departure from the series' usual parodic targets. In this segment, Fielder orchestrates a shoot of the first episode of a fictional romantic competition resembling *The Bachelor*, titled *The Hunk*, of which he is the creator, executive producer, and star. I have chosen this case study not only for thematic cohesion with the rest of the chapter's case studies, but also because the parodic show-within-a-show premise is particularly useful for illuminating *Nathan for You*'s critique of reality television, as is the case with *UnREAL*'s *Everlasting* (which likewise makes use of a double show-within-a-show). I argue that in constructing this fictional program and interacting with non-actors, Fielder performatively critiques the ethical problems inherent in reality television through enacting this unethical behaviour. The ethical problems *Nathan for You* raises concern the imbalance of power between the program's producers and subjects, which includes elements of how the subjects' images are used (e.g., through editing). As *Nathan for You* uses real subjects in its critique of reality television ethics, however, the use of these real subjects in the first place raises additional ethical concerns regarding the program's ironic performative stance.

A typical episode of *Nathan for You* features at least one encounter between Fielder and a business owner, in which Fielder proposes an unorthodox means of promoting the

owner's struggling business. Fielder's advice tends to consist of controversial ideas focused around visibility and branding, as well as the exploitation of obscure legal loopholes. In one episode, "Gas Station / Caricature Artist," Fielder promotes a small-business petrol station by offering a rebate; claiming the rebate would result in petrol costing a mere $1.75 per gallon. In order to disincentivise customers from applying for the rebate, however, Fielder forbids mail-in claims, placing the claims application box on a mountain in the Angeles National Forest, several kilometres away, on which the box is only accessible by a one-and-a-half hour hike. This, Fielder claims, is completely legal, and a "fair" price to pay for such a good offer. The rest of the episode plays out with Fielder attempting to dissuade customers from claiming the rebate, resulting in him leading several customers on a hike up the mountain, and finally an overnight camp, after which he relents and allows them to claim the rebate. A recurring element of *Nathan for You* is the propensity of members of the public (both business owners and other subjects) to go along with Fielder's ideas. Fielder himself encourages this through his persona, a lonely and pathetic individual who craves friendship and fears rejection, implicitly pressuring people into accepting his ideas for fear of upsetting him—an inversion of the business makeover subgenre's propensity for masculine, domineering, and authoritative figures such as Robert Irvine or Gordon Ramsay. The Fielder character's social awkwardness forms a large part of the series' comedy, as he unprofessionally (and unethically) leverages his position as a television host to intrude upon the lives of others in the hopes of forming a friendship. This behaviour forms a running storyline throughout the series, culminating in "Haunted House / The Hunk," as Fielder resolves to address his social anxiety around women.

The latter half of "Haunted House / The Hunk," the fifth episode of the first season of *Nathan for You*, opens with Fielder directly addressing the audience:

> "When you look at me, you probably see a guy who has it all. But really, there's a large part of me that's immature and underdeveloped, especially when it comes to women. . . . Now, if someone came to me with this problem, I would suggest immersion therapy, where you overwhelm yourself with your fear in order to overcome it. So tonight, in order to inspire you, I'm going to overcome my fear of the opposite sex by dating not one, but ten women at the same time. Wish me luck."

Despite Fielder's (in-character) assurance that the segment is done in order "to inspire [his audience]," this premise is transparently self-serving (for the character). After failing to meet women using a variety of methods (including masquerading as a salesperson offering free samples of a fictional product), the Fielder character realises that the

presence of his camera crew attracts attention from members of the public—"women would date me just for the opportunity to be on TV." His solution is to devise a fake reality show, titled *The Hunk*. Fielder recounts creating a casting call and soliciting audition videos, contacting a local actor to be the program's 'host,' and hiring a mansion for an evening. Outside of Fielder and his production crew, all on-screen personnel—the contestants, and *The Hunk*'s host (Anthony Napoli)—believe the shoot to be a real program.

The Hunk draws strong stylistic and narrative inspiration from *The Bachelor*, and the apparent ethical flaws in Fielder's (in-character) use of *The Hunk* likewise cues *Nathan for You*'s audience to consider the power dynamics of *The Bachelor*. The audience is presented with *The Hunk*'s 'title sequence': a sweeping flyover of Los Angeles, which quickly fades into a shot of the program's host, Napoli, emerging from the mansion to address the camera: "I'm Anthony Napoli. Tonight, ten women will gather in this house to vie for the heart of one man. Will they find love? Will they find their soulmate? I'm Anthony Napoli. This is *The Hunk*." The soft piano music underscoring the scene rises, now accompanied by an electric guitar, as the crane-mounted camera pulls up and out to reveal the title of the show written in light on the ground. The title sequence itself is a montage of Fielder holding and smelling a rose and making eye contact with the camera—the rose motif in particular evokes *The Bachelor*, which uses red roses as an item to represent a contestant staying on the program. A final shot shows Fielder's silhouette, which fades out and is replaced by a title: "created by Nathan Fielder." This opening sequence places *Nathan for You*'s audience in the position of an imagined viewer. The humour and parodic meaning of this segment comes from the distance between *The Hunk*'s imagined or fictional meaning (the way it would appear to an audience devoid of the *Nathan for You* framing) and its actual, contextual meaning; that is, while the sequence replicates stylistic elements from *The Bachelor*'s opening sequence, its position within *Nathan for You*, a comedy program, cues *Nathan for You*'s audience to recognise its ironic meaning—in particular, the immediate breach of ethics suggested by the program's 'bachelor' also being the creator of the show.

The Fielder persona's power at all levels of the program manifests both explicitly through the events depicted onscreen, and the implicit manipulation of how these events are depicted via editing; *Nathan for You* presents clearly unethical practices through these elements of the program's own construction. Following *The Hunk*'s opening sequence, *Nathan for You* depicts the arrival of the *Hunk* contestants—presented in the style of the *Bachelor* limousine arrivals that typically take place in the first episodes of that program

(via voiceover, Fielder explicitly references that the moment is "cool, because it [is] just like *The Bachelor*"). Fielder prompts unflattering depictions of the contestants, such as with the arrival of Lauren Ashley, a Christian music singer. There is a cut to Lauren in mid-sentence:

> LAUREN: . . . I really like guys who have black hair and white skin, it's like my—
>
> FIELDER: —You don't like—
>
> LAUREN: —blondes?
>
> FIELDER: —black guys, or?
>
> [*There is a cut from Nathan's face back to Lauren, who is laughing*]
>
> LAUREN: —um… I just—
>
> [*As Lauren speaks, there is a cut to show the limo driver, who is African-American*]
>
> FIELDER: Well, we'll talk more inside.
>
> LAUREN: [*offscreen, laughing*] Okay.

Unmentioned (but implied) here is Fielder's role in constructing this sequence. The visual and aural cut between Fielder's "black guys, or?" and the shot of Lauren laughing gives the appearance that Lauren does not object to Fielder's question, or possibly that she is too taken aback to correct him. Her lack of direct response suggests another possibility: that, in the manner of reality television, an unrelated clip of her laughing from elsewhere in their conversation has been edited into the sequence, giving the *impression* that she does not directly respond. The cut to the limo driver further suggests that the dialogue is as presented (and this cut contributes to the uncomfortable humour of the scene), but as the clip of the driver has no other contextual information, there is no guarantee that this visual is concurrent with the scene's audio. A similar exchange occurs later in the segment: via voiceover, Fielder (in-character) expresses concern that "I was having fun dating all the women, but I began to find it hard to tell if they really liked me, or had other motivations for being here." There is a cut to Fielder mid-conversation with Lauren Ashley:

> LAUREN: —well, I'm working on my album right now, my Christian music album.
>
> [. . .]
>
> FIELDER: Can I hear a song, or?
>
> [*Lauren sings half a sentence. There is a sudden cut to a talking head interview with Lauren*]
>
> LAUREN: My album is coming out this year, so…
>
> [*There is a cut back to Fielder and Lauren sitting together. Lauren directly addresses the camera:*]

My name is L.A., my album's gonna be called *L.A.X.*, and it's gonna be coming out this year. My Twitter [handle] is [@]LA—

[*Fielder's voiceover drowns out Lauren's speech*]

FIELDER [*V/O*]: …And I was soon reminded that most of these girls were just here to be on TV.

Fielder's manipulation in directing the scene a certain way is again implicit here—the original mid-sentence cut to Lauren and Fielder's conversation suggests Fielder has asked a question about her professional life moments before the cut. Likewise, the exaggeratedly quick cut to Lauren's talking head, and her direct address to the camera afterwards, implies she has been asked about or prompted to discuss her album, despite the sequence of the editing suggesting she has taken this action spontaneously. The Fielder character's concern here is itself an ironic element, drawing on the recurring *Bachelor* trope of a contestant participating for the "right" or "wrong reasons" (Cloud 423–24). Additionally, Fielder's character *himself* has other motivations for orchestrating the night's events than what he has claimed to the program's contestants (i.e., to find love). Another one-on-one scene depicts Fielder's manipulation of the *Hunk* contestants outright. Fielder speaks with Zoya, who is from Belarus (a chyron labels her as hailing from Minsk, she speaks with a pronounced accent, and the segment is underscored by balalaika string music), and asks to hear her feelings for him:

FIELDER: Do you like me?

ZOYA: Yeah!

FIELDER: Uh… do you love me?

[*Zoya laughs nervously and stumbles over some words*]

ZOYA: How can I tell [a] person that I love—I need to learn [about] them first, of course, yeah.

FIELDER: I mean… I'd hate to eliminate you so soon.

[*There is a cut to show Zoya smiling blankly at Nathan*]

So maybe I should ask again?

ZOYA: Oh, do I love you? I love you!

FIELDER: Oh, you do?

ZOYA: I do.

[*Cut to a talking head interview with Zoya*]

I like him, he's a really nice person, but—yeah, I love him, so.

Fielder's explicit wielding of his power as the Hunk here suggests some uncomfortable questions—chiefly, to what extent this power could be exercised—including the nature of

Zoya's understanding of the situation, particularly given her distinct marking as foreign. This scene exaggerates a similar trope of *The Bachelor* in which a bachelor or bachelorette attempts to discern how a contestant "really feels," though is here made literal (so too, is the implicit threat of elimination for a 'wrong answer' made explicit). The discomforting nature of this scene suggests at *Nathan for You*'s stance towards *The Bachelor*, particularly in raising the coercive nature of the reality television 'star.'

In the effort to recreate particular narrative tropes of *The Bachelor*, *Nathan for You* appears to have purposefully misrepresented its subjects in a manner that constitutes an ethical failing. While left unaddressed in the episode itself, there is surely also a broader concern here regarding the contestants' diminished ability to provide consent: their consent to appear on *The Hunk* is presumably given in under false pretenses. This assumes that the *Hunk* contestants were not told they were appearing on a parody dating show for a program called *Nathan for You*—while it is difficult to claim this definitively, given the nature of the program it seems reasonable to consider that some information has been withheld from the participants. A question raised by Jay Ruby presents itself: "[h]ow much fiction or interpretation is possible before the subjects not only disagree but begin to be offended, or even fail to recognise themselves at all?" (214). It certainly appears that Lauren Ashley's likeness has been edited in such a way to make her appear as a racist, cynical self-promoter. Assuming charitably that she is not these things, there is a clear moral failing in *Nathan for You* presenting her this way. In strict terms, it constitutes a dishonest misrepresentation of Laura Ashley's character in itself (a Kantian objection), and it might plausibly affect her economic security or community standing to be depicted in such a manner (a consequentialist objection). These objections are not resolved over the course of the program—there is no final assurance that Lauren Ashley is not actually a racist, that she has just been manipulatively edited that way to prove a point—and so these concerns remain open.

Of course, *Nathan for You* is a parodic show, and the unethical practices apparent in the program arguably form part of the program's critique of reality television ethics. By virtue of its unethical treatment of real people, *Nathan for You* cues its audience to reflexively consider the unethical treatment of real people in reality television. The program's parodic meaning requires its audience to recognise Fielder's behaviour is wrong based on pre-existing moral attitudes (see Carroll "Moderate Moralism" 229). Doubt remains as to whether this approach is justified—whether the 'good' of a critique of reality television outweighs the potential damage of repeating these acts in the first place. The efficacy of *Nathan for You* as a public service of sorts (raising moral awareness of ethical

problems in reality television) is not certain. It is not entirely clear, furthermore, how effective *Nathan for You* is in its conveying this subversive meaning. While the segment's use of literalisation in Fielder's conversation with Zoya illustrates an ethically objectionable abuse of power quite plainly, much of the program's deployment of reality television conventions is done with implicit irony (such as the deliberately misleading editing surrounding Lauren Ashley). In these cases, the program's ironic cues are not obvious—they rely on a reflexive interpretation of the program. Such reflexive interpretation is contingent on other factors, such as the ability to recognise the distance between Fielder and his fictional persona; both have manipulated the footage, but the Fielder character has done so in order to support his anxiety over the contestants' true motivations, while the real Fielder has done so in order to deliver a comic point. Because of *The Hunk*'s status as a show within a fictional show (*Nathan for You* the business advice program) within a real show (*Nathan for You* the reality comedy program), *Nathan for You*'s critical stance towards reality television is also necessarily hidden within another layer of interpretation, which may make determining this critical attitude even more difficult. In enacting the ethical problems of reality television, *Nathan for You* to an extent exacerbates these ethical flaws through its use of non-actors who are not willing participants in the program's parodic construction. Rather than prompting its audience to reflexively re-evaluate reality television, *Nathan for You*'s straight re-enactment of flawed reality television conventions calls the program's own ethical status into question.

Conclusion: Parodic Activations of Ethical Judgements

UnREAL, *Sex House*, and *Nathan for You* make use of parodic techniques in order to critique ethical problems in their referent reality television programs. These parodies also varyingly establish a connection to a particular realness—*UnREAL* the real experience of Sarah Gertrude Shapiro, *Sex House* an imagined 'real' audience who cannot discern the program's fictionality, and *Nathan for You* the use of non-actor subjects within a fictional scenario—in order to lend authority to their critique of the form.

In replicating the narrative and stylistic conventions of reality television with critical, ironic distance, these parodic programs draw on assumed audience attitudes towards ethical problems in reality television. The programs' parodic intents, therefore, are not necessarily to impart new information; rather, they are directing their audience to recognise and re-evaluate ethical understandings of reality television. *UnREAL* and *Nathan for You* position their audiences as complicit with the unethical behaviours of reality television producers. In seeing the production processes of reality television (via

their parodic depiction), *UnREAL* and *Nathan for You*'s audiences are intended to recognise the power imbalance that exists between reality television producer and subject. *Sex House* presents this imbalance from the perspective of the reality television subject themselves. *Sex House*'s use of elements from horror emphasises the grotesque nature of this power imbalance.

All three programs encounter various shortcomings in the communication of their parodic meanings. *UnREAL*'s basis in the experiences of Shapiro, and an audience familiarity with the *Bachelor* series of programs, potentially emphasises the program's parodic efficacy; conversely, an audience unfamiliar with Shapiro or *The Bachelor* may not discern the entirety of *UnREAL*'s parody. As an online series, *Sex House* is separated from many contextual signifiers that would mark the program as parodic and comedic. Much of the program's critique of reality television is found in later episodes, which require sustained interaction with the program. This poses the potential for an unobservant or inconsistent audience to not successfully interpret the program's critical meaning, in such a way that can be considered an aesthetic or moral flaw. *Nathan for You*'s performative parody of reality television almost exactly re-enacts scenarios found on reality programming, albeit with ironic distance. In doing so, however, the program itself can be deemed ethically flawed in many of the same respects as its referent.

As long as reality television continues to occupy a position of intense popular attention, fictional parodies of reality programming and its subgenres will likewise mock, critique, or otherwise comment on the genre. As this chapter has demonstrated, these parodic critiques cue their audiences to reflexively re-evaluate their own attitudes toward and experiences with reality television in order to better understand the ethical problems found within.

Conclusion: Cruel TV?

In this thesis, I studied how particular ethical issues emerge from, and are characterised by, different subgenres of reality television. Three questions guided this analysis. I asked firstly how the stylistic and narrative features of particular reality television subgenres create unique ethical problems for programs in those subgenres. Secondly, I questioned how normative ethical theories identify the source of these problems, and how these theories in turn form a judgement regarding the programs. Finally, I asked how non-academic sources articulate criticisms of reality television, and how these criticisms reflect judgements found in formal ethical analysis. I asked these questions to address three problems: how to integrate ethical analysis of individual reality television case studies with the broader study of reality television at a subgeneric level, how to evaluate the strengths and shortcomings of various normative ethical frameworks in analysing reality television case studies, and how ethical criticism of reality programming contributes to the overall field of reality television studies.

By connecting reality television case studies to their historical and social contexts, I argued in this thesis that these contextual elements determine the relationship between reality television producer, subject, and assumed viewer. Because these relationships reflect the specific ideological underpinnings and goals of reality television subgenres, different subgenres of reality television are likewise predisposed to ethical problems that differ in nature. I employed frameworks of normative ethics—deontological, consequentialist, and virtue ethics positions—to identify ethical failings on behalf of producers (and occasionally subjects) by first establishing how these frameworks evaluate ethically correct and incorrect behaviour, and then by applying the principles of these frameworks to case studies from reality television. In addition to this, I analysed how formal ethical critiques of reality television align with popular criticisms of reality television that are found in social media, journalism, and other television programs. I argued that these popular criticisms function as implicit ethical judgements of reality television. These implicit ethical judgements determine ethical value according to the same principles of formal ethical frameworks, and these implicit ethical judgements reflect common cultural beliefs surrounding the basis of ethical practices with regards to reality television.

My first chapter analysed *Extreme Guide to Parenting* and *Toddlers & Tiaras*, two docu-soap programs that prominently feature children. I interrogated the treatment of children according to the issues of informed consent, children's agency, and representation, and how these issues are understood within and assigned ethical value or

negative value within Kantian deontology and utilitarian consequentialism. As well as historical information regarding the docu-soap subgenre itself, I also engaged with scholarship from the field of documentary studies, particularly documentary ethics, due to docu-soap's use of documentary narrative and stylistic conventions. Arguments by Winston, Pryluck, Ruby, and others establish the responsibilities of documentary filmmakers toward their subjects, particularly with regards to informed consent, subject agency, and representation (and self-representation). While docu-soap also differs from documentary in ideological intent—docu-soap primarily aims to entertain rather than inform—the similarities between documentary and docu-soap nonetheless justify this approach.

I argued in my first chapter that the involvement of children in the docu-soap subgenre—the focus of which is generally intimate personal details relating to individuals' private life—frequently constitutes an ethical failing on part of a docu-soap's producers, and often the child's parents. Under the principles of a Kantian framework of ethics, the producers of these programs arguably treat children as means to an end (the end being the creation of the program itself). When considered within a Kantian framework, similarly, the parents or guardians of the child subjects are arguably not acting out of duty to ensure good treatment for their child. A utilitarian consequentialist perspective presents more ambiguous results, in part because of the difficulty in accounting for a given program's effects on a large number of individuals, that call into question this framework's applicability to reality television case studies. Arguments from documentary studies identify ethical value or fault in these case studies along similar principles to those in normative ethics: namely, that documentarians have an ethical responsibility (i.e., duty) to respect the autonomy and privacy of their subjects, particularly vulnerable subjects such as children (a belief that aligns with deontological arguments), or that documentary's scientific and informative purposes serve a general public good that can outweigh individual cases of unethical conduct (a viewpoint that corresponds to some utilitarian consequentialist arguments). Importantly, these ethical judgements generally relate to *young* children's participation in reality television—while older children (i.e., adolescents) are generally seen to possess the cognitive and emotional competence required to make an informed decision to participate in reality television, pre-adolescents and infants lack this same capacity; as such, reality producers and parents bear more responsibility for ensuring the well-being of these children in an ethical manner.

In my second chapter, I interrogated makeover programs *Snog Marry Avoid?* and *The Biggest Loser Australia* on their joint use of humiliation and therapeutic ethos—a strategy which is foundational to the subgenre—and used Kantian deontology and the joint consequentialist-virtue ethics framework outlined by Driver in order to critique these programs. I also analysed popular criticisms of these programs that have circulated in British and Australian journalism in order to explicitly connect these implicitly ethical criticisms to formal ethical thought. As well as the history and social context of makeover television, I additionally engaged with scholarship regarding the care of the self and therapy culture in order to illustrate the role of these programs in a contemporary context of neoliberal technologies of self-governance—a key function of the makeover subgenre in contemporary culture—a role in which I find these programs to be inadequate.

I argued in my second chapter that the combination of humiliation and therapeutic discourse amounts to an ethical failing because of the contradictions in this pairing—that is, reality television producers cannot adequately respond to individual therapeutic needs *as well as* humiliating their subjects. The joint use of humiliation and therapeutic discourse is therefore an ethical flaw in the many programs of the makeover subgenre that rely on these two characteristics. Through analysis of these programs within both deontological and evaluational externalism frameworks, I find that these programs are unable to appropriately address the needs of their subjects. Both programs' humiliation of their subjects is an ethical failing from a deontological standpoint, as the producers of these programs have disregarded the inherent value of their subjects. The use of an evaluational externalist framework also finds these programs to be at ethical fault, as they neither produce positive outcomes (with some minor exceptions) nor reflect virtues held by the programs' producers that would generally produce positive outcomes. As neoliberal technologies of self-governance—both programs present self-improvement as a series of choices coupled with physical and emotional labour—I found these programs (and others in the makeover subgenre) ill-equipped to meaningfully intervene in their subjects' lives in a way that produces tangible improvement. These programs likewise fail as instructional and inspirational materials because they fail to provide sufficient guidance for audiences to follow along with the examples provided.

In my third chapter, I studied three televisual parodies of the relationship-based social experiment subgenre of reality television: *UnREAL*, *Sex House*, and *Nathan for You*. My focus in this chapter is how these parody programs utilise the narrative and stylistic conventions of reality television, as well as parodic techniques, in order to critique

perceived ethical problems in this subgenre (generally relating to the relationship between producer and subject) as well as reality programming in general. I also questioned how these programs establish a connection to the real (in various senses of the term) in order to heighten their critiques of reality television. Scholarship surrounding parody, specifically televisual parody and television mockumentary, supported this analysis; in addition, I engaged with scholarship regarding this subgenre of reality television in general, as well as documentary ethics (as referred to in my first chapter), in order to consider the ethics of this type of parodic critique itself.

In my final chapter, I argued that all three case studies not only use common parodic techniques to repeat and distort established reality television referents, but also establish a connection to the metatextual real in order to lend authority to their critiques of reality television: *UnREAL* is given authenticity by its repetition of commonly-held ethical concerns regarding *The Bachelor* and the historical experience of its co-creator Sarah Gertrude Shapiro, *Sex House*'s mode of distribution detaches it from certain typical parodic signifiers in such a way that its audience is prompted to imagine others perceiving the program as authentic, and *Nathan for You* makes use of a metafictional host/subject character as well as non-actors who are unaware of the program's fictional nature. Each of the three programs make claims along two similar themes: that reality television producers hold an inordinate amount of power over their subjects (a power that is repeatedly abused), and that the ideological basis of this form of programming is itself unrealistic and deceptive (and thus unethical). Because of the televisual nature of these programs, however, the efficacy of their parodic critique of reality television depends on consistent audience engagement; viewed out of context, a single episode or segment of each program may not provide sufficient parodic signalling (and the work would be interpreted as genuine) or may not otherwise communicate the full extent of its parodic meaning (and audiences may only form an incomplete understanding of the program's critique). Each program's connection to the real, furthermore, poses potential ethical complications in itself. *UnREAL*'s historical basis is only established through secondary texts which discuss the program, in such a manner that this connection to the real (and thus claim to authority) is not accessible to all of the program's viewers. *Sex House*'s deception of its audience as to its truth status (the program's fictional nature requires sustained viewing before it becomes apparent) can be considered an ethical flaw in that the program is unable to make its critique clear. *Nathan for You* features prominent ethical failings in its unethical

manipulation of its subjects; these ethical flaws may in turn undermine the program's parodic intent.

The central arguments of my thesis form the basis for further important work in the field. I have argued for the significance of subgeneric characteristics (and the historical and social contexts behind these subgenres) in shaping the particular content of an individual reality television case study. This approach emphasises the relationship of individual programs to the historical, social, and ideological contexts that have produced them, and provides a middle ground between broad genre overviews (that give little detail about specific ethical concerns) and individual ethical evaluations of case studies (that do not consider the wider characteristics of reality programming). The development of reality television subgenres—not merely in how programs exhibit these characteristics, but how and why reality television subgenres wax and wane in popularity over time—remains a relevant consideration, as the significance of particular contemporary trends in reality programming (such as the decline of makeover programming) bears examining.

Following on from this are the ethical consequences of these subgeneric characteristics—that is, in tracing the basis of reality television subgenres, I have shown how particular ethical issues in reality television are an extension of the ideas and strategies embedded within groups of programs themselves. These findings have significance both for further study of ethics in reality television, but also for related, developing fields of study—for example, the ethical questions in the intersection between children, digital technology, and privacy. Viewership, which I have largely excluded from this thesis, warrants further scrutiny; while I have considered assumed or intended viewers here, there is significant room for studying how viewers actually consume, interpret, and ethically evaluate the reality television they watch. Further study into how viewers consciously and unconsciously respond to reality television provides context for how individuals make and share ethical judgements regarding not only reality television, but other mass art.

Finally, I have demonstrated that ethical judgements regarding reality television already abound in popular culture—they are made and circulated throughout social media, in journalism, and in other texts. While these judgements often do not use the same formal language and logic of normative ethical frameworks, they are undoubtedly concerned with the same questions of moral responsibility, consequences, and character. The depiction of reality television in other works in particular suggests avenues for further research; the cultural attention that is directed toward reality television in other mass art (by volume

alone) signals the ongoing relevance of reality television is shaping other media. The ethical dimension of these works also requires further thought—not only for how ethics is and ought to be analysed and communicated through popular works, but how this itself can be done in an ethically responsible manner.

Reality television continues to hold a prominent position in popular television culture and remains a rich area of research. With this thesis, I contribute to the growing analysis of ethics in reality television and demonstrate the ongoing value of this field of study.

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